

## **Wilhelm Von Humboldt: A Critical Review on His Philosophy of Language, Theory And Practice of Education**

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### **Abstract**

Wilhelm Von Humboldt was among those philosophers who used language as a tool to study the human mind and interpret human cultural differences. Humboldt equated language and thought as inseparable. His model of language can be summarized as follows: the character and structure of a language expresses the inner life and knowledge of its speakers, and that language must differ from one another in the same way and to the same degree as those who use them. Humboldt's approach to Allgemeine Bildung or well-rounded education was based on his own experience and lifelong learning process. The study of Humboldt's work 'helps to clarify the central problems and questions of recent educational theory as matters concerning all of us, and also help to resolve issues which require further theoretical and practical analysis' (Benner,1990)

### **Introduction**

Language is part of culture. In fact, it is the basic tool of learning. It represents our worldview and expresses the specific features of national mentality. Therefore, questions as such arise, "*Do speakers*

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*of different languages think differently? Are there distinct habits of thought and feeling that correspond to English, Malay, Arabic or any other language? Do speakers of different languages view the natural, social, and spiritual worlds with different lenses?* Wilhelm von Humboldt was among those philosophers who attempted to find answers to these questions. He used language as a tool to study the human mind and interpret human cultural differences.

### **A Brief Biography**

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), one of the most influential linguists of the nineteenth century, was a statesman and a pedagogue. He is remembered for his contribution in linguistics - the philosophy of language and the field of educational reform. The Humboldt University in Berlin was named after him. In particular, he is acknowledged as being the founder of the Prussian education system which was used as a model for education systems in countries such as the United States and Japan. However, his interests were not only historical like most of his contemporaries. Robins (1997) states that:

Humboldt wrote voluminously on various topics in linguistics and on various languages. He was concerned with explaining the infinitely creative aspect of language, both grammatical and lexical, by which the necessarily finite resources available to each speaker can be made to respond to all the needs that as an individual and as a member of a nation or a speech community he may encounter.

In addition, Humboldt regarded language as an activity that arises spontaneously from the human spirit. In his opinion, languages are different just as the characteristics of individuals are different.

From the early nineteenth century until his death in 1835, Humboldt used his connections as a statesman to correspond with people all over the world, which helped him gather information from missionaries, traders, diplomats, colonial administrators, explorers, and fellow scientists. He collected word lists in Quechua; studied Sanskrit grammar; pored over epics in Javanese; scrutinized Bible

passages in Malagasy and exchanged letters with scholars on Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese characters.

Humboldt's philosophy of language was in line with Enlightenment views and thoughts. According to Robbins (1997):

Humboldt joined others of his age in their eulogies of Sanskrit as a magnificent example of inflectional structure. He was fully alive to the importance of Sanskrit and to the now developing Indo-European comparative historical linguistic.

He did not rank languages in a hierarchy - languages in his view were all equivalent and each one carries value and worth. For this reason, he has rejected the notion favored by Schlegel's brother Friedrich that Sanskrit was a language given by God to the early Indo Europeans, and he certainly did not believe it to be the indicator of a deeper Aryan racial superiority. Even though this was the case, he agreed that Indo-European languages were superior due to their inflectional grammar.

### **Philosophy of Language**

In contrary to the common beliefs of philosopher and linguists of his time, Humboldt equated language and thought as inseparable, as language completely determining thought, in a hypothesis known as the *Weltanschauung* (world view) hypothesis (Brown, 1968). Humboldt (Cited in Robbins, 1997) claims that:

Language is, as it were, the external manifestation of the minds of peoples. Their language is their soul, and their soul is their language. It is impossible to conceive them ever sufficiently identical.

Humboldt (Cited in UNESCO, 2000) further elaborates that language:

A world that lies between the world of external phenomena and the inner world of man. Language is an integral part of us. It is in our mind, memory and it

changes shape with every movement of thought, with each new socio-cultural role. The language is active in all areas of spiritual life as creative force, the language is an important method of formation and existence of man's knowledge about the world.

He also emphasized “profound semantic” differences between languages which lead to varying “cognitive perspectives,” an idea commonly known as cultural relativity (Wierzbicka, 3).

Although little attention was given to this extreme view at the time, this same idea drew much interest and criticism in the 1930's in the emergence of the hypothesis known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic Relativity). According to Sapir (1928, Cited in Salzmann, 1993, p.153):

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... The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built upon 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.

On the footsteps of Herder, a German philosopher, Humboldt emphasized the connection between national language and national character, this was due to the common romanticism notion of the time. More original was Humboldt's theory of “inner” and “outer” form in language. The outer form of language was the raw material (the sounds) from which different languages were made; the inner form was the structure of grammar and meaning that was imposed upon the material form and differentiated one language from another. This “structural” conception of language was popular for a short time in the middle of the twentieth century.

Additionally, Humboldt viewed language as dynamic rather than static. It was regarded as an activity rather than a product of an activity. Therefore, a language is not a set of actual utterances produced by speakers but the underlying principles or rules that make it possible for speakers to produce such utterances and, moreover, an unlimited number of them. This idea was adopted later by the German philologist, Heymann Steinthal and physiologist and psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. This notion influenced theories on psychology of language. Its influence, like that of the distinction of inner and outer form, can also be seen in the thought of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist. However, its full implications were probably not perceived and made precise until the middle of the twentieth century by Noam Chomsky, who re-emphasized it and made it one of the basic notions of generative grammar.

In conclusion, Humboldt's model of language can be summarized as follows: the character and structure of a language expresses the inner life and knowledge of its speakers, and that language 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.

### **Theory and Practice of Education**

Humboldt was appointed the Prussian minister of education. A few days after taking up his duties in Berlin, Humboldt informed his wife on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1809 of his plan to arrange 'for schools to be paid for by the nation alone' (Letters, 591); he wanted a fund to be set up to enable schools to be run and their teachers paid independently of the government and external circumstances. He took that idea further in a letter to Nicolovius (Letters, 594, Cited in UNESCO, 2000):

Education is a matter for the nation and we are preparing (admittedly with great caution) to diminish the powers of the State and win the nation over to our own interests.

Even though he was the Prussian minister of Education, he never advocated a system of national education that was predominantly Prussian; he looked beyond Prussia and saw himself as a spokesman of the whole German people. His scientific work always had in mind the interests of all mankind. Yet it was not until after his death that Humboldt's school plans and fragments of a treatise on the "Theory of Human Education" were published. In the treatise, Humboldt (Cited in UNESCO, 2000) claims that:

The ultimate task of our existence is to give the fullest possible content to the concept of humanity in our own person [...] through the impact of actions in our own lives.

Humboldt's concept of education stressed the fact that "self-education can only be continued [...] in the wider context of development of the world" (GS, VII, p. 33). That is to say, each person is not only entitled, but also obliged, to shape the world around him. According to him (GS, I, p. 284):

Education, truth and virtue' must be disseminated to such an extent that the 'concept of mankind' takes on a great and dignified form in each individual.

As aforementioned this can only be achieved personally on an individual level. A person must:

absorb the great mass of material offered to him by the world around him and by his inner existence, using all the possibilities of his receptiveness; he must then reshape that material with all the energies of his own activity and appropriate it to himself so as to create an interaction between his own personality and nature in a most general, active and harmonious form" (GS, II, p. 117).

Moreover, Humboldt's educational concepts are influenced and based on social considerations. In 1789, he wrote in his diary (GS, XIV, p. 155, Cited in UNESCO, 2000):

The education of the individual requires his incorporation into society and involves his links with society at large.

In sum, Humboldt's approach to *Allgemeine Bildung* or well-rounded education was based on his own experience and lifelong learning process. *Bildung* was not a utilitarian enterprise to prepare students for particular ways of earning a living; rather, it was a lifelong process, distinct from vocational or professional training, and was to inform teaching at all three levels of the Prussian school system - elementary, secondary, and university. Through *Bildung*, each person might seek to realize the human potentialities that he possessed as a unique individual.

In his view, university education must continue and complete the general education imparted in the previous school years; university education must, however, differ from teaching in elementary and secondary schools and have a special nature of its own. Without teachers there can be no elementary education but their role is not central in university training:

The university teacher is therefore no longer a teacher and the student no longer someone merely engaged in the learning process but a person who undertakes his own research, while the professor directs his research and supports him in it. Close contact with their teachers should enable students to undertake their own independent scientific work (UNESCO, 2000).

### **Humboldt's Influence on Linguistics**

With the rise of historical – comparative linguistic research, Humboldt's contributions to the philosophy of language were forgotten. However, by the second half of the twentieth century, Noam Chomsky and Umberto Eco became important scholars in the philosophy of language which drew a lot from Humboldt's philosophical theories. Today, Humboldt is also recognized as the

first European linguist to identify human language as a rule governed system rather than just a collection of words and phrases. This is also the basis for Chomsky's theory of language. Chomsky quotes Humboldt's description of language as a system which makes "infinite use of finite means". However, there are also major differences between Humboldt's view of language and Chomsky's view of language. (Brosche, 1981) Recently, Humboldt has been given credit as the originator of the linguistic relativity theory, developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf.

Even though encyclopédias often cite Humboldt as being the founder of the term "worldview", a confusion is invariably made by citing the German term "Weltanschauung", which is rightly associated with ideologies and cultural mindsets in both German and English. Humboldt's work was concerned more with what he called "Weltansicht", the linguistic worldview. This distinction was cleared up by one of the leading contemporary German Humboldt scholars, Jürgen Trabant, in his works in both German and French.

The reception of Humboldt's work remains problematic in English-speaking countries, despite the work of Langham Brown, Manchester and Underhill. Furthermore, little rigorous research in English has explored the relationship between the linguistic worldview and the transformation and maintenance of this worldview by individual speakers. One exception is the work of Underhill who explores comparative linguistic studies both in 'Creating Worldviews: Language, Ideology & Metaphor (2011)' and in 'Ethno-linguistics and Cultural Concepts: Truth, Love, Hate & War'. Probably the most well-known linguist working with a truly Humboldtian perspective writing in English today is Anna Wierzbicka who has published a wide number of comparative works on semantic universals and conceptual distinctions in language. Unfortunately, mainstream linguistics and cognitive linguistics has, as yet, proven on the whole unwilling to open up to rigorous research into both language and discourse in foreign languages.

As for the educational policy and theory, it has been neglected until this century. Eduard Spranger was the first to "recognize the true value of Humboldt's contribution to educational development at



the transition from the nineteenth to twentieth century” (Benner, 1990, 5). Recent focus on intellectual history has been replaced by focus emancipatory interpretation of Humboldt's pedagogical thinking in a series of works, most recent of these was conducted by Dietrich Benner. Benner (1990, 210) holds that

The study of Humboldt's work [...] will help to clarify the central problems and questions of recent educational theory as matters concerning all of us, and also help to resolve issues which require further theoretical and practical analysis.

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