

The Expressivist Conception of Language and World:
Humboldt and the Charge of Linguistic Idealism and Relativism*

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Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) is rightly regarded as a thinker who extended the development of the so-called expressivist conception of language and world that Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) and especially Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) initially articulated.¹ Being immersed as Humboldt was in the intellectual climate of German Romanticism, he aimed not only to provide a systematic foundation for how he believed linguistic research as a science should be conducted, but also to attempt to rectify what he saw as the deficiencies of Kant's philosophical system. Specifically, he sought to emend Kant's overly ahistorical, disembodied, and *a priori* conception of sensibility, understanding, and reason by critically transforming Kant's framework so as to encompass the totality of the manifestations of human spirit (*Geist*). He conceived this ambitious task as a "comparative anthropology" that aims to reconcile the universality of language, thought, and culture with their individual, expressive achievements. As a contemporary scholar of Humboldt puts it, Humboldt's scholarly project as a whole consists in working out a way of understanding the activities of the human being under the general aspect of a philosophically guided anthropological-historical research that

* Published in J. Burmeister and M. Senteny (eds.), *On Language: Analytic, Continental and Historical Contributions* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), pp. 3-26.

¹For a portrayal of expressivism as an intellectual movement, see Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. H. Hardy (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 168-242; Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), Ch. I, especially 13-28. I will spell out what expressivism is for the purposes of this paper below.

takes the examination of language as its starting point.² Humboldt's reflections on language and his status as one of the founders of the modern science of linguistics, then, should be understood against this broader background and not judged solely as a work in the philosophy of language or linguistics.

Having said all this, the discussion of Humboldt that follows in this paper cannot be concerned with most of these topics, let alone with their interconnections. Rather, my primary aim is to show how an expressivist thinker like Humboldt has the conceptual resources from within his own framework, and, perhaps surprisingly, with some help from the contemporary philosopher of mind and language Donald Davidson, to reject a criticism commonly made against expressivist conceptions of language and world. This is the charge that this sort of expressivism threatens the objectivity of the world by emphasizing the role of language in the constitution and disclosure of the world. Cristina Lafont makes just this charge against Humboldt (and other philosophers in the German expressivist-hermeneutic tradition). Specifically, she argues that expressivist philosophers of language are all ultimately committed to some pernicious form of linguistic idealism and relativism.³ In what follows, I shall first present Humboldt's reflections on language and give some textual evidence for why he is often read—mistakenly in my view—as a linguistic idealist and relativist. Second, I will briefly sketch Lafont's charge of linguistic idealism and relativism against Humboldt. Third and finally, I will show how she misunderstands Humboldt's expressivist conception of

² Jürgen Trabant, *Traditionen Humboldts* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 102, see especially 44f., 59. For a general introduction to Humboldt as a thinker and statesman, see Tilman Borsche, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1990).

³ Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, tr. J. Medina (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: MIT Press, 1999), Part I, especially Ch. 2; idem., *Heidegger, Language, and World-Disclosure*, tr. G. Harman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3-7.

language and world by connecting my rebuttal to her criticism with Davidson's argument that successful communication does not require the sharing of explicit rules or conventions that govern in advance the use of words.

I. Humboldt's expressivism as a critical appropriation of Kant

Humboldt articulates the expressivist conception of language and world most extensively in his major treatise on language, *On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*.⁴ For our purposes, I will highlight and explicate three of Humboldt's commitments: (1) his expressivist conception of the necessary interdependence of language and thought, which he develops on the basis of a critical appropriation of Kant's philosophy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; (2) his famous and important distinction between understanding language as an activity (*energeia*) as opposed to a work or finished product (*ergon*); and (3) his thoroughgoing holism about the relation between language and the world, which culminates in his seemingly relativistic claim that "in every language lies a peculiar worldview" (434; 60).

In a famous passage in *On Diversity*, Humboldt states very clearly his commitment to the necessary interdependence of thought and language:

Language is the formative organ of thought. Intellectual activity, even if mental and internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes through sound externalized in speech and perceivable for the senses. Intellectual activity and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. But the former is also

⁴ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, reprinted in A. Flitner and K. Giel (eds.), *Werke (III): Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002 [first published in 1836]); idem., *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, ed. M. Losonsky and tr. P. Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). All page references in the text will henceforth be to this work. The first references will be to the German text as edited by Flitner and Giel, while the second will be to the English translation as edited by Losonsky and translated by Heath. While I have consulted the latter, all translation of this text will be my own; unless otherwise indicated, all italics are in the original German.

intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a connection with the verbal sound; thought cannot otherwise achieve distinctness, nor can representations become otherwise a concept. (426; 54f.)

In interpreting this passage, one may be initially tempted to attribute to Humboldt what can be called a “derivativist” conception of language.⁵ Derivativism in this context is the view that using a language is optional or at best secondary to what is involved in being directed at the world at all; its central claim is that our most basic mode of intentionality need not in principle involve language. Instead, whatever contents linguistic expressions possess derive from (or “piggyback upon”) the prior access to a more basic mode of intentionality that is supposedly antecedently intelligible and conceptually separable from the use of language. Now Humboldt might seem to be expressing this sort of derivativism about language when he writes above that intellectual activity is externalized through sound and thus becomes perceivable, even if it is originally mental and internal. This initial way of putting things seems to suggest that thoughts can be fully formed and contentful prior to their externalization in language.

This derivativist reading of Humboldt, however, is mistaken in a number of ways. To begin with, we must understand what he is saying in this passage against the background of his underlying commitment to two general tenets of expressivism as an intellectual movement. Humboldt’s commitment at this level ought to go some ways toward dissuading us of any temptation to interpret him as being committed to derivativism with regard to the relation of language to thought. In particular, his expressivism supplies us with a conception of the *internality* of thought that is decidedly not Cartesian or classically empiricist for the following reasons. First, what comes to be expressed is (only) internally generated in the sense that it is an expression of one’s

⁵ I owe this label to William Blattner, *Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 69-75.

individuality; the content of what is expressed has to emerge internally in the sense that it is something recognized by the expresser as his or her own product or creation. Second and more importantly, the activity of expressing what is internally generated is not secondary to but rather partly constitutes the determinateness of the content of what is made manifest through expressive activity. The articulation of the content of a thought is thus crucial to the determinacy that it expresses; the activity of expression is intrinsically connected with the determinate content of what is expressed. If the emphasis on these background commitments of Humboldt is correct, his talk of the thoroughgoing internality of intellectual activity is innocent of any Cartesian or classically empiricist tendency that mistakenly reifies the distinction between the “inner mind” and the “outer world.” For the internality in question is not epistemological, nor grounded in some sort of allegedly mental substance or immediate introspective consciousness, but expressivist: The activity of expression (clarification, articulation, interpretation, etc.) is not extrinsic to, but rather partly constitutive of, the very content of what is expressed.

Thus, Humboldt rejects any derivativism about the role of language by insisting on the *necessary interdependence* of thought and language: Thought and language are one and inseparable from each other because thought cannot become determinate unless it is closely bound up with and expressed in language (paradigmatically, in the verbally articulated sound [427-29; 55f.]).⁶ The linguistic dimension of what it is to grasp a thought ought not to be regarded as a useful but in principle optional way of gaining access to a prelinguistic mental structure, one with contents that are presumed to be antecedently intelligible prior either to their non-overt expression in thought or to their

⁶ I will return below to discuss how we should understand Humboldt’s insistence that the articulated sound is a constitutive aspect of the interdependence of thought and language.

overt expression in speech. Indeed, although Humboldt shows himself to be working within a generically Kantian framework regarding the necessary conditions of intentionality in a passage that follows the one cited above, he emphasizes that there can be no *actual objectivity* (*wirkliche Objektivität*) absent the use of language in intellectual activity. As he writes:

Subjective activity forms in thought an object [*Objekt*]. For no class of representations can be regarded as a purely receptive contemplation of an already present object [*Gegenstand*]. The activity of the senses must be connected synthetically with the inner action of the mind, and from this connection emerges the representation, [which] becomes an object [*Objekt*] vis-à-vis the subjective power and, perceived anew as such, returns to the latter. *But language is indispensable for this.* For the mental striving, by breaking out through the speaker's lips in language, returns as the product of that striving back to his ear. Thus, the representation becomes transformed into actual objectivity without thereby being deprived of subjectivity. Only language can do this; and without this transformation the objectivity that returns to the subject, occurring always with the help of language even in silence, the formation of the concept, and hence all true thinking, is impossible. So quite regardless of communication among human beings, speaking is a necessary condition for the thinking of the individual [even] in enclosed solitude. (428f.; 56, emphasis added)

Humboldt is claiming here that language is not only necessary for the articulation of thought so as to render thought determinate, but language is also required if thought is to have *objective purport* at all. How can he justify this claim? In order to see this, we are forced to delve somewhat into Kant's argument, in particular in the first half of the Transcendental Deduction of the categories of the understanding in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (the so-called "B-Deduction" in the literature on Kant), for Humboldt can be read as adapting a line of argument from Kant in that work. In entering slightly the "interpretive jungle" of the B-Deduction, my only purpose will be to outline a recognizably plausible interpretation of what Kant seeks to establish there; it is beyond the scope of my aims here to defend this reading of the B-Deduction against alternative readings. In any case, Humboldt could not be entitled to the conclusion about the necessity of subjective activity for the possibility of actual objectivity unless some sense can be made of what he appropriates from Kant's line of argument in the first half of the B-Deduction.

How then does Humboldt critically appropriate Kant's thought in the B-Deduction? To begin with, Kant argues that the **I think** must, as a necessary condition of its possibility of representing (thinking) anything at all, be able to accompany and connect the manifold of representings that are given to it in its sensibility, regardless of whether they are spatiotemporal or not.⁷ Otherwise episodes of representing (thinking) could not count as being *cognitively* significant at all; they must be unified synthetically by the **I think**, for such episodes would otherwise be merely successive in time and could not count as non-arbitrary, ordered connections. Kant claims that such connections can only be intelligible against the background of the spontaneous activity of the **I think**, and it is for this reason that the **I think** has a *transcendental* status and is characterized as "transcendental apperception" or "the original synthetic unity of apperception" in the B-Deduction. What is important for our purposes is that, for any finite being, it must, on the one hand, be capable of receiving manifolds of intuition through its sensibility (whatever specific forms they may be) and, on the other hand, be capable of synthetically connecting these intuitings, and more generally representings, in its understanding, in the sense that there is an **I think** that must be able to accompany these representings; otherwise we are not entitled to hold that what we are dealing with here is a sensible (finite), concept-using, and hence cognizing being.

This Kantian line of thought can only be regarded as the first step, however, towards understanding Humboldt's claim that subjective activity effects actual objectivity. The second and equally crucial step requires understanding how the **I think** is

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. and ed. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §16, B131-36. (I will henceforth follow the typographical decisions of Guyer and Wood's edition of this work.) My reading of the B-Deduction is indebted to its collective interpretation by John Haugeland, James Conant, and John McDowell, which was presented and defended in various seminars relating to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at the University of Pittsburgh.

that unity through which all of the manifold given in an intuition is united into a concept of the object [*in einen Begriff vom Objekt vereinigt wird*]. It is called **objective** on that account, and must be distinguished from the **subjective unity of consciousness**, which is a **determination of inner sense**, through which that manifold of intuition is empirically given for such a combination.⁸

Kant is emphasizing here that, if we are to be entitled to take our representings as determinations properly *about an object*, as opposed to being merely our *subjective associations* about the way it seems to be, there must then be a distinction between objective determinations of manifolds of representings and merely subjective (arbitrary and contingent) associations pertaining to such manifolds.⁹ In other words, it is constitutive of what it is to be representings at all that they be of or about objects, regardless of the epistemological concern of whether or not these representings actually succeed in representing objects. Kant's topic is thus *objective purport*, not the *accuracy* of the representation of an object, which already presupposes that such a representation can be about an object at all (*überhaupt*). It is thus crucial to understand that an object, as Kant argues, is "that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is *united*."¹⁰ In other words, what it is to be an object at all requires that it can be the locus of the unification of manifolds of contents (in this particular case, contents that are intuitively given).

How then does this unification take place? Kant's answer is that it is the activity of *judging* that unifies the contents under consideration in an object: "a judgment is nothing other than the way to bring given cognitions to the **objective** unity of apperception."¹¹ The concept of object and the activity of judging are made for each other in the following sense. On the one hand, the activity of judging is such that it involves

⁸ Ibid., B139. The translation has been slightly modified because it matters philosophically that the "in" is accusative (which is clearly indicated in German by "*einen*") and should be translated as "into," something that Guyer and Wood (nor Kemp Smith, for that matter) choose not to do for whatever reason.

⁹ Ibid., B142.

¹⁰ Ibid., B137, emphasis added.

¹¹ Ibid., B141.

precisely unifying various contents purportedly about an object *qua* the bearer of these contents, ones that in the course of judgmental activity are to be determined as compatible or incompatible. On the other hand, an object is such that it is precisely the locus of the contents ascribed to it in judgmental activity. In other words, no activity counts on the one hand as judgmental unless it purports to be of or about objects *qua* the bearer of properties; by the same token, no item counts as an object, at this level of abstraction from whatever properties it may actually bear or not, unless this item is susceptible to determinations of the way it is in judgmental activity. The concept of object and the activity of judging are two sides of one coin; they are coordinated in such a way that they together constitute what it is to be a discursive, i.e., a concept-applying or judgmental, being. This understanding of the necessary interplay of concepts through their expression in judgments purporting to be about objects is the significance of Humboldt's claim that subjective activity *forms in thought* an object, i.e., that representings must be transformed into actual objectivity without thereby being deprived of subjectivity. "Actual objectivity" in this sense signifies the *objecthood* of anything that we finite beings can encounter in experience *qua* the mutual interplay of sensibility and understanding:

The synthetic unity of consciousness is therefore an objective condition of all cognition, not merely something I myself need in order to cognize an object, but rather something under which every intuition must stand **in order to become an object for me**, since in any other way, and without this synthesis, the manifold would **not** be united in one consciousness.¹²

Having followed Kant so far regarding this line of argument, Humboldt now can be read as transforming this Kantian conception of objectivity—more specifically, of the significance of judgmental activity as necessarily involving concepts and objects—by emphasizing how *language* is indispensable to the actualization of objectivity. Humboldt

¹² Ibid., B138.

has learned in this regard the common lesson of Hamann's and Herder's critiques of Kant. According to these critics, Kant goes wrong in believing that the objectivity effected *a priori* through subjective activity in the manner just explicated above can be intelligible and operative apart from how judgmental activity is inescapably bound up with our use of language.¹³ As Humboldt writes:

The conception of language as supposedly designating objects in themselves that are already perceived is disconfirmed [...] by the consideration of what language engenders as its product. One would rather never exhaust the deep and full content of language on such a conception. Just as no concept is possible without language, so also there can be no object for the mind, since indeed each external object only receives by means of the concept its complete essentiality for the mind. *The entire mode of the subjective perception of objects turns necessarily, however, into the formation and use of language.* (433; 59, emphasis added)

Humboldt makes explicit here his thoroughgoing commitment to the expressivist-constitutive conception of thought and language, one that he (like Hamann and Herder) takes Kant to have ignored to his detriment in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Moreover, it bears mentioning, if only here in passing, that Humboldt (again following Hamann and Herder) also takes Kant to be mistaken by failing to take into account how our use of language is in practice always situated and articulated socially in dialogue, and by extension, in light of our history, culture, and tradition. This is a point that Humboldt is tireless in emphasizing throughout *On Diversity*. In this regard Humboldt further develops the Kantian framework in another way by emphasizing the *social* dimension of objectivity. As he writes:

In appearance [i.e., in actuality], however, language develops only socially, and the human being understands himself only once he has tested the intelligibility of his words by trial upon others. For objectivity is heightened [*gesteigert*] if the self-formed word is echoed from a stranger's mouth. But nothing is robbed from subjectivity, since the human being always feels himself to be one with other human beings; indeed, it is strengthened [*verstärkt*] since the representation transformed into language belongs no longer exclusively to a single subject. [...] Although the cognitive basis of truth, of the unconditionally fixed, can lie for the human being only within himself, the struggle of his mental striving towards it is always surrounded by the risk of deception. With a clear and immediate sense only of his mutable limitedness, he must even regard truth as something lying outside him; and one of the most powerful means of approaching it, of measuring his

¹³ Johann Georg Hamann, "Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft," reprinted in A. Henkel (ed.), *Briefwechsel (Band V): 1783-1785* (Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1965); Johann Gottfried Herder, "Treatise on the Origin of Language," reprinted in *Philosophical Writings*, tr. and ed. M. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

distance away from it, is social communication with others. All speaking, from the simplest on, is an attaching of what is individually felt to the common nature of humankind. (429f.; 56f.)

We are now finally in a position to explain why Humboldt claims, in the first passage cited above, that thought “is also intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a connection with the verbal sound” (426; 54). For in order for the objectivity of one’s thoughts to be “heightened” and “strengthened” through their understanding and assessment by others, the perceivability of these thoughts in actual utterances is clearly a necessary condition for the possibility of such understanding and assessment. There has to be a *material medium* for the expression, understanding, and assessment of thoughts, the paradigmatic mode of which is the verbal sound. This is just what the concrete expression of one’s thoughts in verbal sound puts us in the position to encounter.¹⁴ Having emphasized that the paradigmatic mode of this material medium is the verbal sound, it does not thereby follow that other concrete expressive media such as written words and texts, sign language, or even strings of zeros and ones, cannot serve, each in their own distinctive way, as the vehicles of thoughts, provided that they be given at the very least semantic interpretations. As I understand Humboldt, the important point here is that there be some material medium that embodies and expresses thoughts, not so much that this medium must be the verbal sound. The embeddedness of thought and its expression in a material medium is indispensable for the determinacy of the content of thought because items in experience that bear determinate contents must be perceivable if conceptual (linguistic) articulation is not to be merely secondary to, but rather partly constitutive of, what it is to think at all. Humboldt’s insistence on the materiality of thought goes beyond the commonplace that other people cannot understand what a person

¹⁴ Hamann and Herder also emphasize the significance of sound as an indispensable aspect of using a language; see Johann Georg Hamann, “Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft,” and Johann Gottfried Herder, “Treatise on the Origin of Language,” 97-112, especially 108-111.

thinks unless there are some material manifestations expressive of his or her thoughts. His claim must be the stronger one that the capacity to have thought at all requires that thought be embedded in a material medium. For if the articulation of thought in language is partly constitutive of the very content of thought, and furthermore, if this articulation cannot occur except as embedded within a material medium, it follows then that there cannot be any thought at all, or at least any thought that is *determinately* contentful, if such articulation operated in the absence of such a medium.¹⁵

Humboldt's view that language must have a material medium leads us to the explication of his most famous distinction between understanding language as an *activity* (*energeia*) as opposed to a *work* or *finished product* (*ergon*). His point is that although language cannot dispense with its concrete expression in some material medium, neither can it be adequately understood as something that is reducible without remainder to the particular linguistic concretions that are expressed in that medium. The relevant passages in which he first makes this point are worth quoting at some length because we will be concerned with its details below. As Humboldt writes:

We must regard language, not as a *dead product*, but far more as a *producing*; we must abstract more from its appearance as the designation of objects and mediation of understanding and, by contrast, go back more carefully to its origin, which is closely intertwined with inner mental activity, and to their mutual influence. (416; 48, emphases added)

Language, regarded in its actual nature [*wirklichen Wesen*], is something enduring and [yet] at each moment transitory. Even its maintenance in writing is always only an incomplete, mummy-like preservation that is only then required when one seeks in so doing to make perceivable its living character. It itself is not a *work* [*Werk*] (*ergon*), but an *activity* [*Tätigkeit*] (*energeia*). Its true definition can, therefore, only be a genetic one. It is, namely, *the ever-repeating mental labor of making the articulated sound capable of expressing thought*. ... For in the scattered chaos of words and rules that we are likely accustomed to call a language, there occurs only the particular brought forth by this speaking and this never completely. An additional effort is required in order to recognize the mode of the living speaking and to provide a true image of the living language. What is precisely the highest and finest [aspect of language] cannot be recognized from those separated elements and can only be perceived or discerned in connected speech, which is all the more evidence that language proper [*die eigentliche Sprache*] lies in the act of its actual production. It alone [i.e., in connected

¹⁵ The issue of what follows from the idea that thought must have a material medium is, of course, quite complicated. Because pursuing it would take me too far from the direct concerns of this paper, I break off my discussion of it here. (I am responding here to a good question posed by one of the anonymous readers of a previous version of this paper. My thanks to that person for drawing my attention to this question.)

speech alone] must in general always be thought of as what is true and primary in all investigations that are to penetrate into the living essentiality of language. The analysis into words and rules is only a dead makeshift of scientific analysis. (418f.; 49, emphases added)

What aspects of language does Humboldt seek to illuminate in these passages? First, he clearly emphasizes above all how *language proper* (*die eigentliche Sprache*) can only be adequately understood when we take into account its active and living character, not merely the way in which it shows up as externalized linguistic concretions and, in that sense, as finished products. This is clearly the reason why Humboldt characterizes language proper as something actual (*wirklich*) rather than merely occurrent (*vorhanden*). For the emphasis on the actuality of language expresses the thought that language proper is constituted as an unfolding and dynamic process, as the emphasis on its momentary actualization in connected speech indicates. Thus, the true nature of language is such that it cannot be fully captured in terms of its perceivable products, nor can it, *a fortiori*, be fully explained by means of the phonetic, grammatical, or lexical rules that are specified by the linguists who investigate such linguistic products.

Second, Humboldt's conception of language as *activity* connects readily with the line of thought, as argued by the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, that we can only fully understand what it is to speak and understand a language when we take into account how it is interwoven with our other non-linguistic activities as a whole (we must conceive language as a *form of life* [*Lebensform*]). And when we try to understand aspects of language in complete isolation from these other activities, we lose sight of the determinate sense that they make in those contexts, become tempted to reify "what is enduring" into "dead words and rules" and neglect how "what is transitory" in our use of language contributes equally to what it enables us to express and do. This is why the

analysis of language into words and rules as abstracted from their original contexts of application amounts to “only a dead makeshift of scientific analysis.”¹⁶

Humboldt espouses, then, a sort of *practical linguistic holism* about the nature of language in at least two ways. First, we must consider the nature of language in terms of its use in connected speech, for it is deeply misguided, as Humboldt argues, to believe that we can understand the nature of language atomistically by beginning with “the designation of objects by words, and then proceeding to put them together. In actuality, speech is not compounded out of words that have preceded it; the words, on the contrary, emerge from the totality of speech.” (448; 70) Indeed:

Language can be compared to an *immense web*, in which every part stands with the others, and all with the whole, in a more or less determinately recognizable context. Whatever his point of departure, the human being always makes contact in speaking with a merely selected part of this web, but does so always in such an instinct-like way, as if everything with which this one part must necessarily agree [*in Übereinstimmung stehen muss*] were simultaneously present to him in the same moment. (446; 69)¹⁷

Second, as already emphasized above, speaking and understanding a language must be understood as an activity that is thoroughly embedded within the wider social and cultural—or more generally, non-linguistic or worldly—context in which the production and use of language is situated and intelligible. Language on this conception cannot be abstracted from its interwovenness with non-linguistic practices if we are to understand its actual, i.e., dynamic and living, nature. Consequently, in light of these reflections on the necessary and pervasive holism of what is involved in having and using language, Humboldt claims, perhaps rather indelicately, that “there lies in every language a peculiar worldview [*so liegt in jeder Sprache eine eigentümliche Weltansicht*]” (434; 60).

¹⁶ Although I am not concerned with showing explicitly how Humboldt’s reflection on language resonates with that of the later Wittgenstein, it should be apparent and striking how much Humboldt anticipates many of the insights of which the later Wittgenstein reminds us in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

¹⁷ Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), §241, emphases in the original: “It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] in opinions but in form of life.”

II. Is Humboldt a linguistic idealist and relativist?

We are now in the position to see how a philosophical critic of Humboldt like Cristina Lafont is tempted to argue that he is committed to some pernicious form of *linguistic idealism and relativism*. On Humboldt's conception of language, speaking a language is thoroughly intertwined with what it is to "disclose the world": not just in the sense that using a language is a necessary condition of knowing the world, but in the more profound sense that using a language, especially in the case of using a particular vocabulary or conceptual apparatus, constrains the possible ways in which the world shows up to us as *intelligible* at all.¹⁸ This suggests that using language and disclosing the world are intertwined, with neither capable of being what it is apart from its intimate connection with the other. Unfortunately, Lafont's critique of Humboldt, which takes for granted the orthodox, received reception of Humboldt (cf. the so-called "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis"), seizes almost exclusively upon Humboldt's claim that there lies in every language a peculiar worldview as the basis for arguing that Humboldt must be committed to a bad form of linguistic idealism and relativism. Specifically, she takes the idealist and relativist consequences as following necessarily from Humboldt's radical holism. As she objects:

Language is conceived as a prior and insurmountable totality that allows for no external perspective to it. Precisely for this reason, this view [of Humboldt] has the tendency to *reify* language, to turn it (in Habermas's terms) into a "contingent absolute," which by coinciding with the limits of the world itself *determines* everything that can appear *within* it. This calls into question in a radical way the indispensable presupposition for a defense of the *objectivity of knowledge*: namely, the assumption that there exists an objective world with entities independent of language. What things *are* becomes relative to that which, in a contingent manner, is linguistically prestructured in each historical language.¹⁹

¹⁸ For sophisticated and delicate ways of articulating this tricky idea, see, e.g., Ian Hacking, "Language, Truth and Reason," in M. Hollis and S. Lukes (eds.), *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982); and Charles Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁹ Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, op. cit., 32, italics in the original.

According to Lafont, Humboldt's expressivist conception of language, and in particular his emphasis on the world-disclosing function of language, is *idealist* because there cannot be anything outside or external to how we language users always already encounter entities as linguistically structured. Moreover, given the fact that human beings obviously speak different natural languages, Humboldt's expressivist conception of language and world is also, according to Lafont, thereby unavoidably *relativist* because speaking different natural languages always implies that there are different worldviews. Indeed, the implication that Lafont attributes to Humboldt's expressivism is that speaking different natural languages opens the door for the idea that these different worldviews may be incommensurable.

More specifically, in order to show why Humboldt cannot evade his commitment to linguistic idealism and relativism, Lafont argues that he must endorse the thesis that *meaning determines reference*. This thesis states that

different linguistic expressions, with their different meanings, determine our (epistemic) *access* to their referents. That is, linguistic expressions are held to determine, if not what there *is*, at least what there *can be* for a linguistic community—or what such a community *can say* (i.e., *believe*) that there is. In this sense, the key function of language is held to lie in its *world-disclosing* capacity.²⁰

This specification of the thesis is the more semantically self-conscious way of articulating, if not outright linguistic idealism, then at least linguistic relativism. The central idea, to put it in terms of a familiar slogan, is that the limits of my language are both the limits of the world and my knowledge of it, with the important emphasis that the primary function of language is taken to be descriptive rather than designative. Its primary function is descriptive in the sense that what a word or expression picks out (i.e., what its referent is) is supposed to depend on whether the set of descriptive specifications

²⁰ Ibid., xii, italics in the original.

associated with the word or expression identifies something in the world or not.²¹ Lafont also characterizes this descriptivist view as the “no-name” theory of language, for descriptivism reduces “names to predicates, or ... the designating relation between names and objects to the attributive relation between a predicate and the object of predication, [which is the core commitment that] underlies the thesis that meaning determines reference.”²² As Lafont claims, once a thinker like Humboldt commits himself to this “no-name” theory of language, he cannot help but reduce

*the functioning of language as a whole to its world-disclosing function, a reduction achieved at the expense of its designative function. As a result of this reification of language, specific languages prejudice our experience through the worldviews that they provide. This occurs to such a degree that even the supposition of an objective world independent of language (one to which we relate through the corresponding use of our words), an assumption that lies at the basis of our notion of truth, can no longer be maintained in any intelligible sense.*²³

From Lafont’s perspective, the combination of Humboldt’s commitment to the “no-name” theory of language, and hence to the thesis that meaning determines reference, with his radical linguistic holism yields a conception of language “as a prior and insurmountable totality that allows for no perspective external to it.” The threat is that we would then lose our access to truth, objectivity, and even to the world itself. If this is in fact Humboldt’s conception of language, then Lafont’s charge that he is inescapably committed to a questionable linguistic idealism and relativism would be right.

But is this interpretation and assessment of Humboldt’s view right? In fairness to Lafont, Humboldt does, in the context of his provocative claim that there lies in every

²¹ This view in the theory of reference has come to be called “descriptivism,” one which has come under strong attack and fallen into much disfavor since the 1970s in analytic philosophy of language due to Donnellan’s, Putnam’s, and Kripke’s forceful criticisms of it. It is beyond the scope of this paper, however, to examine explicitly the connections of Lafont’s appropriation of theories of (what she calls) direct reference and her critique of Humboldt.

²² Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, op. cit., 35, italics in the original.

²³ Ibid., 36, italics in the original.

language a peculiar worldview, express a line of thought that seems to support her interpretation of him as a linguistic idealist and relativist. As Humboldt writes:

As the individual sound stands between the human being and the object, so the whole language steps in between him and the nature that affects him both inwardly and outwardly. He surrounds himself with a world of sounds, so as to take up and process within himself the world of objects. ... By the same act by means of which he spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it, and every language draws about the people that possess it a circle from which it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another. (434; 60)

If one takes this passage at face value, it suggests that language (in this case, how it is paradigmatically expressed in the verbally articulated sound) serves as an *epistemological intermediary* between the human being and the objective world, as evoked by the use of the metaphor of language as a circle whose outer boundary divides us from the world. Language, on this epistemological construal of its primary function, is something that organizes (conceptualizes, determines, shapes, etc.) something non-linguistic (paradigmatically, objects). In short, if Lafont's characterization of Humboldt's conception of language and its relation to the world is correct, then Humboldt would be committed to what Donald Davidson has described and attacked elsewhere as the dualism of conceptual scheme and uninterpreted content.²⁴ If so, Humboldt would be indeed a linguistic idealist and relativist and hence subject to Davidson's trenchant criticism that this dualism is incoherent.

But Lafont's objection here is actually quite misguided. In fact, once Humboldt has been properly interpreted, he can actually count on Davidson in this regard as an ally rather than an opponent who has any sympathies with Lafont's line. For Lafont's most serious mistake in her critique of the expressivist conception of language and world consists, ironically, in her *own reification* of what it is to speak and understand a

²⁴ Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," reprinted in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

language. Despite her extensive efforts to do justice to the expressivist conception of language, she assumes in the final analysis that it is just another version of the traditional view of language as a conceptual scheme that organizes the uninterpreted (i.e., unconceptualized and non-linguistic) contents that the world gives us. She clearly saddles expressivist philosophers of language like Humboldt with this understanding of language as a conceptual scheme in order to set the stage for her charge that these philosophers are all inescapably linguistic idealists and relativists. But she herself must be committed in the end to this view of language as a conceptual scheme, for otherwise it is not understandable why she feels compelled to show how language users must “break out” of their language in order to make contact with the world that exists independently of its manifestation in language.

This view of language as a conceptual scheme, however, precisely reifies language by presuming that it can ever be something self-contained as “a prior and insurmountable totality that allows for no perspective external to it.” In fact, Humboldt himself has the resources within *On Diversity* that criticize just this reified idea of what it is to have a language. As he writes: “the individuality of a language (as the term is commonly understood) is *only comparatively such*, whereas true individuality lies only in the speaker at any given time. Only in the individual does language receive its ultimate determinacy.” (439; 63, emphasis added) What Humboldt importantly emphasizes here is that the idea of language as a conceptual scheme that implies a particular worldview is a *misleading abstraction* that fails to take into account how actually using a language is a dynamic affair. Given his own commitment to the conception of language as an *activity* (*energeia*), having a language can never imply that its speaker uses her language in a

static way such that its very use and possession *rigidly presupposes or implies some fixed worldview*. Rather, the actual determinacy of a worldview emerges only as a result of the activity of using a language. Speaking a language (having a worldview) must be regarded as the occurrences of linguistic events in which a speaker, at given particular moments, brings a worldview to expression. She is, of course, constrained by her linguistic and cultural heritage in doing so, and moreover, also subject, as any moment of speaking and understanding must be, to possible requests for articulation and justification.²⁵

Perhaps a more familiar way of making the same point is Davidson's argument in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" that successful communication and understanding among interlocutors does not require sharing the same language. In this paper, Davidson wants to show "how people who already have a language (whatever exactly that means) manage to apply their skill or knowledge to *actual* cases of interpretation."²⁶ His argument uses for purposes of illustration the example of malapropisms, i.e., words or linguistic expressions that are regarded as "incorrectly" used in a particular context of utterance and yet also unproblematically understood by their audience in just that context. Davidson argues that the fact that we have no problems understanding malapropisms shows that standard conceptions of linguistic competence, i.e., of what is involved in "sharing or knowing a common language," go wrong in requiring that understanding the

²⁵ I am indebted to Tilman Borsche for this comment in conversation; see also Tilman Borsche, *Sprachansichten: Der Begriff der menschlichen Rede in der Sprachphilosophie Wilhelm von Humboldts* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 70-75. In a different context, Patrick Byrne has helpfully suggested that the dynamic character I have sought to bring out in Humboldt's reflections on language applies equally significantly to Humboldt's hermeneutical conception of the self; moreover, Byrne points out, rightly, how this other dimension of dynamism in Humboldt's thought would be another way of rebutting the mistaken charge of bad idealism and relativism that Lafont attributes to him. Although I have not sought to explore this aspect of Humboldt's thought, I completely agree with Byrne's comments here and thank him for them.

²⁶ Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," reprinted in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 100, emphasis added.

meaning of words in everyday communication be governed by shared explicit rules or conventions that are learnable and applicable in advance of actual occasions of interpretation. For our purposes, what Davidson's argument shows is that the act of understanding someone's utterances on any given occasion is actually what is necessary and sufficient in order for mutual understanding to happen, not the sharing of the common knowledge of explicit rules or conventions that supposedly makes possible and underpins this very understanding. As he writes:

[T]he theory we actually use to interpret an utterance is *geared to the occasion*. We may decide later we could have done better by the occasion, but this does not mean (necessarily) that we now have a better theory for the next occasion. The reason for this is ... perfectly obvious: a speaker may provide us with information relevant to interpreting an utterance *in the course of making the utterance*.²⁷

In other words, it is only in the course of interpreting the utterances of a speaker that we come to understand what they mean in uttering their words on those particular occasions in the first place; the meanings of those words emerge as the result of the various interpretive adjustments that the hearers make in their efforts to understand the speaker. The example of malapropisms serves for Davidson only as a vivid illustration, for he wants to show how all acts of understanding—in the first instance, all acts of linguistic communication—are characterized by the dynamic way in which we come to understand someone's utterances through interpretive adjustments on our part. In Davidson's terms, the only necessary condition for successful communication is the actualization on any particular occasion of the "passing theory" by means of which hearers and speakers come to understand one another.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., 101, emphases added. Davidson is being somewhat misleading by calling that which we use to interpret an utterance a "theory." What he has in mind is better understood as a capacity, a know-how or skill. To call this a "theory" makes it sound much too intellectualistic and explicit than it needs to be.

²⁸ Ibid., 101ff.

If Davidson's argument here is convincing, it is neither sufficient nor necessary for language users to share a common language, and hence *a fortiori* to share a common worldview in any fixed and substantive sense, in order to communicate with and understand one another. Sharing a common language is not sufficient because this very idea is an abstract construct, for the language that every speaker utters and every hearer uses to interpret the speaker is actually an *idiolect*, a way of using words peculiar and yet more often than not quite understandable to every speaker or interpreter. But an idiolect cannot be what philosophers and linguists typically have in mind as a language, in the sense of a set of conventions governed by explicit rules that determine how we are to interpret all possible utterances by its speakers and hearers in advance. In order to understand someone's idiolect, what must happen on any occasion is that members of the audience interpretively adjust their "prior theory" in the course of interpretation so that they can arrive at a usable "passing theory" for achieving understanding. Nor is sharing a language necessary for actual successful communication, for such communication requires figuring out, often through "wit, luck, and wisdom" (among much else), what someone means on a particular occasion in the course of interpreting her.²⁹ As Davidson writes:

A passing theory is not a theory of what anyone (except perhaps a philosopher) would call an actual natural language. "Mastery" of such a language would be useless, since knowing a passing theory is only knowing how to interpret a particular utterance on a particular occasion. Nor could such a language, if we want to call it that, be said to have been learned, or to be governed by conventions.³⁰

In short, understanding one another in communication does not presuppose sharing a language in the sense of sharing explicit rules or conventions that supposedly govern in advance our use of words. Mutual understanding is rather an achievement that results

²⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

from actually successful communicative encounters that are brought off by means of one's interpretive skill and acumen.³¹

Once we see that Davidson and Humboldt are essentially arguing for this same point about the dynamic character of what is actually involved in understanding meaning and, by extension, understanding other individuals, Lafont's temptation to hold that speaking a language presupposes or implies any rigid and static worldview turns out to be *illusory*.³² Our use of language in successful communication and interaction with others is never so rigidly tied down to a particular natural language (a particular worldview) such that we need to break out of it in order to understand one another and make contact with the objective world.

We may say that linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time..... But if we do say this, then we should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world. For there are no rules for arriving at passing theories, no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodological generalities.³³

³¹ It must be mentioned, however, that Davidson's point that what interlocutors use for purposes of understanding each other's utterances on any occasion is actually an idiolect and not a language (in the sense in which, *pace* Davidson, most philosophers and linguists tend to conceive the latter) must be correctly understood. Bjørn Ramberg argues convincingly that the proper relevant contrast in the context of what is required for successful communication among two or more interlocutors on any given occasion is not the contrast between languages and idiolects, as Davidson makes it out to be in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (and elsewhere), but rather the contrast between *occasions of utterance* and *abstractions* from those occasions, whether as languages *or* idiolects, that are attainable by generalizing over the utterances of interlocutors over stretches of time; see Bjørn Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), Ch. 8, esp. 106. Davidson himself seems ultimately not to be aware of the full significance of his point here.

³² Gadamer makes more or less the same point in terms of how we should *not* conceive our "horizons of understanding" as static and committed to any fixed worldview. Indeed, he emphasizes how the idea of the fusion of horizons that occurs in any act of understanding is at best a *heuristic device* and may be misleading insofar as one (falsely) assumes that there can be, prior to the actual occasions of interpretation and understanding, horizons that are supposedly self-contained and closed off from others who inhabit other putative horizons, whether they be from another historical era or another culture; see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., tr. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 304-07. In Lafont's critique of Gadamer, she errs in an analogous way by saddling Gadamer with the same commitment to linguistic idealism and relativism, and thus goes wrong more or less in the same way in which she is wrong about Humboldt; see Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, op. cit., 76-116.

³³ Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," 107. Notice the echo of the same point in the last paragraph, in particular in the last sentence, of "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," 198: "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false."

In sum, Lafont is mistaken in conflating the thought that using a language thoroughly permeates what it is to have and be in the world at all with the wrongheaded idea of language as a self-contained totality, a conceptual scheme that, supposedly already intelligible on its own, then structures and organizes the world, a world that is also supposed to be in some nontrivial sense intelligible on its own. Consequently, the charge of the “reification of language,” of which Lafont is so fond as the disparaging phrase she uses against German expressivist-hermeneutic philosophies of language, is wrongly targeted, for it should actually be aimed at the conceptual-scheme view of language as a self-contained totality rather than at the expressivist-hermeneutic conception of language and world. Ironically, if my analysis of where Lafont goes wrong is convincing, she should have objected to *herself* as someone who has illegitimately reified language (and also, for that matter, the world). For it is only someone who already unwittingly assumes that language must be a conceptual scheme who would then feel compelled to show how a language user can and must nevertheless “break out of language” so as to make contact with the objective world.³⁴

³⁴ I want to thank Georg W. Bertram and Endre Begby, as well as two anonymous readers affiliated with Cambridge Scholars Press, for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper. I also thank members of the audience who responded to an abridged version of this paper that I presented, in April 2006, at the 7th annual Graduate Student Philosophy Conference at Boston College and the 28th annual Graduate Student Philosophy Conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I have also benefited from my participation in a seminar on Herder’s and Humboldt’s philosophies of language that took place during a research stay in the summer of 2004 at the Institut für Philosophie at the University of Hildesheim in Germany. I thank Georg W. Bertram and Tilman Borsche for that opportunity.