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Songs of Nature

From Philosophy of Language to Philosophical Anthropology
in Herder and Humboldt

by

JENNIFER MENSCH (Western Sydney University)

In this paper I trace the manner in which Herder's philosophy of language developed a theory of mental cognition that would go on to ground Herder's approach to hermeneutical issues regarding interpretation and translation, (an approach that would in turn provide also the groundwork for his subsequent efforts to write a philosophical history of mankind). Herder's approach to the question of language and interpretation has been repeatedly lauded for its important influence on the later work done by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer, but in this discussion I am going to put him more directly in conversation with Wilhelm von Humboldt. Although recent critics like Michael Forster have made a strong case for Friedrich Schlegel as the theorist whose work represented the most significant development of Herder's program – and have in fact derided Humboldt's approach as *derivative* at its best, and *wrong-headed* in its few attempts at originality – I will argue that we should instead recognize that Humboldt's philosophy of language represents a genuine development of Herder's thesis.¹ This development, however, is one that is accomplished by way of Humboldt's synthesis of Kant's mature theory of reason, and the kind of research that was being done by the medical-anthropologists at work in Göttingen while Humboldt was a student there in the late 1780s. This is something that I will be interested in sketching out in the essay as well.

Now while Herder's philosophy of language is most associated with the prize winning essay he had submitted to the Berlin academy on the *origin* of language in 1772, he had in fact been working towards these issues in

¹ MICHAEL FORSTER, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*, Oxford 2011.

a number of short pieces written during the mid-1760s, during the time period, in other words, that he was taking courses from Kant. Herder's own course notes reveal that he was perhaps most interested in Kant's discussions of physical geography and its shaping effects on the customs and character of a nation, but the mid-1760s mark a period during which Kant was *himself* most interested in Hume's attack on dogmatic metaphysics, and most convinced by the empirical approach taken to questions of cognition in Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*. I mention this because it provides, I think, the necessary backdrop for understanding the important role played by empirical considerations across Herder's work as a whole, and certainly and most clearly in his approach to language, culture, and history. For even as Kant was struggling to redirect metaphysics away from dogmatic accounts of the human soul – a struggle on full display in 1766's "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer" – his search for a replacement remained out of focus apart from an awareness on his part that the empiricist challenge could not be avoided. Kant's eventual solution, the essential outlines of which appeared in his *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770, redefined metaphysics altogether, henceforth identifying it as a philosophical investigation into the limits and extent of human cognition. What this investigation revealed, according to Kant, was the manner in which human experience was wholly dependent upon the combined contributions of sensible intuition and intellectual concepts. This much is of course well known about Kant's theory of cognition, but I want us to hold it in mind now as we turn to Herder since, as I will explain later, we can mark a difference between the influence had by the so-called Precritical Kant on Herder's account, and the mature theory of Reason as a spontaneous, *Selbsttätigkeit* once we come to Humboldt's philosophy of language.

Now as I said at the outset, Herder's philosophy of language entails also an approach to the hermeneutical problems facing interpretation and translation. Why this is so will become clear in a moment, for now though we can start with the question posed by the Berlin Academy of Sciences, a question in two parts, which asked first, whether "human beings, left to their natural abilities, are able to invent language for themselves," and second, "by what means would they arrive at this invention?"² While Herder's discussion contained a response to the account given by Rousseau in his 1755 essay on the origin of inequality, I want to focus our attention first on the manner in which Herder sought to locate a position between two

² JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language* [1772], edited and translated by Michael Forster in: JOHANN GOTTFRIED VON HERDER, *Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 65, 127. This was Herder's prize-winning essay submitted to the German Academy in 1771.

popular forerunners: Süßmilch, who had argued persuasively for the need to assume a divine origin, and Condillac, who had adopted instead an empiricist's approach to the origin of language.³ Leaving the details aside for now, we can understand the challenge facing theorists here as yet another iteration of a problem that had plagued theories of knowledge as much as it had theories of biological generation since the long 18th century's extirpation of innate ideas in the one case, and a teleologically driven soul in the other. For each of these had solved a respective problem of form. Why was their constancy between separate minds when it came to the truths of mathematics and logic? – because these truths were established before the soul came to inhabit the body. Why was there everywhere a demonstration of the fixity of species, of the stable reproduction of like from like? – because these forms or species lines had been established during creation such that each individual could carry its true pattern forward in every reproduction. As empiricists like Locke tried to make sense of cognition *without* recourse to some set of ideas that had been implanted in the soul, a solution emerged so far as stability would henceforth depend upon the formal structures and law-like functioning of the mind, a solution resisting any appeal, therefore, to the supernatural. Arguments regarding the origin of language followed a similar path as those taken in epistemology and in the life sciences, with one side insisting that the stable grammatical rules inherent to every language could only be the product of supernatural design, and the other focused instead on the search for an empirical solution.

In Herder's retelling, Süßmilch and Condillac were both inheritors of Locke so far as each had fixed their attention to the stable functioning of the mind as the ground for further investigation. Süßmilch's mistake, in Herder's view, was just that he had failed to appreciate the extent to which this was the case. Thus while Süßmilch had argued that the first humans had received their divine instructions from God regarding the use of language – an instruction evident, for example, in the ordering of words into verbs, nouns, etc. – Herder insisted that without language, there would have been no rational capacity to receive God's instruction in the first place. As Herder interrogated Süßmilch's position he thus asked,

How can the human being learn language through divine instruction if he has no reason? And of course he has not the slightest use of reason without language. So he is supposed to have language before he *has* it and before he is *able* to have it? Or to be capable of becoming rational without the slightest use of reason on his own part? In order to be

³ ETIENNE BONNOT DE CONDILLAC, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* [1746], edited and translated by Hans Aarsleff, Cambridge 2001; JOHANN PETER SÜSSMILCH, *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* [1756], Berlin 1766.

capable of the first syllable in the divine instruction, he of course had, as Mr. Süßmilch himself concedes, to be a human being, that is, to be able to think distinctly, and with the first distinct thought language was already perfect in his soul; hence it was invented from his own means and not through divine instruction.⁴

Here we can note the manner in which Herder takes reason and language to be mutually constitutive, as he puts it: “If no reason was possible for the human being without language then good!, the invention of the latter is as natural, as old, as original, as characteristic, for the human being as the use of the former.”⁵ But before we unpack this further, Herder’s critique of Condillac’s approach is worth briefly rehearsing also, since it is especially helpful for understanding the challenge at hand. For while Herder’s reconstruction of Süßmilch’s position seems easy enough to refute on logical grounds, Condillac’s approach is ultimately closer to Herder’s and requires therefore special handling.⁶

In his 1746 *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, Condillac had devoted special attention to the production of signs. The key to this was a mental capacity for reflection on one’s sensible contents, a capacity that allowed the subject to devote their attention to particular objects, to distinguish them from others objects, and to identify a difference between parts and wholes. In this way, Condillac argued, the mind gradually creates signs for things and these signs in turn strengthen our capacity for reflection as we go on to create class concepts and other abstract notions. Condillac’s discussion revolved around a fictional tale of two children, living together in nature without speech. As he depicts the scene, it is the desire for communication that first drives the children to imitate the sounds of nature, an imitation that leads them to connect sounds to objects and then via reflection, to generate a system of signs. Herder’s explicit response to this scenario is three-fold. First, and echoing the strategy taken against Süßmilch, Herder complains that the children could not have linked a given sound with a specific object unless they had reason and since reason demands language, Condillac’s scenario is already impossible from the start. Second, Condillac had fundamentally mischaracterized the nature of human thought. It was not the case that humans simply had some *additional* capacity that allowed

⁴ HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, pp. 91–92.

⁵ HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, p. 91.

⁶ For some defense of Süßmilch against Herder’s attack, see BRUCE KIEFFER, Herder’s Treatment of Süßmilch’s Theory of the Origin of Language in the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache: A Re-Evaluation*, in: *Germanic Studies* 53/3 (1978), pp. 96–104. A clear discussion of Herder’s response to Süßmilch is by MICHAEL FORSTER, *Herder’s Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation: Three Fundamental Principles*, in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 56/2 (2002), pp. 323–356.

them to use language whereas other animals could not; on the contrary, it was clear to Herder that animals could think even if they could not use language, so there must be some other, more fundamental difference at work. As he would come to see it, language was in fact the hallmark of human life, standing in relation to mankind to the same extent that instinct does in all animal life. Finally, Herder rejected what he took to be an essentially instrumental view of language in Condillac's account so far as it was the children's announced desire to communicate with each other that drove the development of language in the first instance.

Following the model set by Condillac and Rousseau, Herder provided his own *mise en scène*, and prepared his reader in advance for the points to note, "The human being demonstrates reflection," he explained,

when the force of his soul operates so freely that in the whole ocean of sensations which floods the soul through all the senses it can, so to speak, separate off, stop, and pay attention to a single wave, and be conscious of its own attentiveness. The human being demonstrates reflection when, out of the whole hovering dream of images which proceed before his senses, he can collect himself into a moment of alertness, freely dwell on a single image, pay it clear, more leisurely heed, and separate off characteristic marks for the fact that this is that object and no other.⁷

In this description, cognition begins with sense – a "whole ocean of sensations" – which then undergoes a process of mental conditioning so that from this ocean "a single wave" can first be noticed, before working to "separate off characteristic marks" which can identify it as "that object and no other." This process was captured as the movement from *Besinnung* to *Besonnenheit*, an activity that moved from the identification of a *Merkmal* to the generation of a *Merkwort*. Herder took this stage of the process to be already complete so far as it constituted the mind's "inner language," such that the *Merkwort* was thus "simultaneously the first act of reflection and the first word of the soul."⁸ As Herder put it – with Rousseau in mind, "The savage, the solitary in the forest, would necessarily have invented language for himself even if he had never spoken it. Language was the common-understanding of his soul with itself, and a common-understanding as necessary as the human being was human being."⁹ For external communication, however, there needed to be a *Mitteilungswort*, an audible expression that allowed the mind to hear the created word and to have this poetic act thereby reflected back to it; a virtuous circle responsible for the co-constitution of language and reason.

⁷ HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, p. 87.

⁸ NIGEL DESOUZA, *Language, Reason, and Sociability: Herder's Critique of Rousseau*, in: *Intellectual History Review* 22/2 (2012), pp. 221–240, here p. 227.

⁹ HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, p. 90.

Given this, the role played by hearing was crucial for Herder's account, since it was the heard sound which not only realized self and world, but indeed mediated all of the other senses within the ocean of sensation. In the 1760s Herder had described the ear as a string instrument composed of auditory fibers that in number and position stand in a ratio, an instrument capable of receiving the sounds of nature and transforming them into song.¹⁰ In the prize essay he declared that "if the first human language was song, it was song which was as natural to the human being, as appropriate to his organs and natural drives, as the nightingale's song was natural to the nightingale" for that song was "precisely our own resounding language." And "so there sang and resounded the whole of nature as an example, and the human being's song was a concerto of all these voices, to the extent that his understanding needed them, his sensation grasped them, his organs were able to express them [...] an expression of the language of all creatures within the natural scale of the human voice!"¹¹

With this all in mind, the parts of Herder's own origin scene fall quickly into place. The setting is pastoral. The main character a human witness to the bleating of a lamb. "Let that lamb pass before his eye as an image," Herder tells us, and the witness will mark it from a distinctively human perspective.

As soon as he develops a need to become acquainted with the sheep, no instinct disturbs him, no sense tears him too close to the sheep or away from it; it stands there exactly as it expresses itself to his senses. White, soft, wooly – his soul, operating with awareness, seeks a characteristic mark – *the sheep bleats!* – his soul has found a characteristic mark. The inner sense takes effect. This bleating, which makes the strongest impression on the soul, which tore itself away from all the other properties of viewing and feeling, jumped forth, penetrated most deeply, remains for the soul. The sheep comes again. White, soft, wooly – the soul sees, feels, takes awareness, seeks a characteristic mark – it bleats, and now the soul recognizes it again! 'Aha! You are the bleating one!'¹²

For Herder this was the primal scene for understanding the origin of language, and it explains why he believed that the oldest languages had demonstrated the greatest fidelity to the productive power of nature and soul. The oldest languages were run through by the immediacy of sensations, an immediacy that was best captured in the meter and rhythm of poetry and song so far as these forms of speech were illuminated throughout by the agency and *poiesis* of the speaker. In an age "when people had not yet thought of

¹⁰ HERDER, *Critical Forests: Fourth Grove* [1769] in: JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, translated and edited by Gregory Moore, Princeton 2006, p. 243.

¹¹ HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, p. 104.

¹² HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, p. 88.

books,” Herder asks, “what was language then? Nothing but singing and speaking nature,”¹³ indeed,

The whole of the world with its movements and forms is, for the man who looks, a great table of images upon which all figures live. He lives in an ocean of living waves, and the source of life in him streams and works against these. That which streams against him, how he senses it and describes it with sensation, that makes up the genius of poetry in its origin.¹⁴

It is in this sense that language is inseparable from place, for Herder, for it is *Klima* – both natural and cultural – that provides us with the ocean of sensation from which language is born.

Now we can position Herder’s theory thus far as one in line with the tradition inaugurated by Locke, but most familiar to Herder through Kant, a tradition that sought to balance the empiricist’s insistence that we be faithful to the sensible contents of our experience, against the rationalist’s demands that we account for the stability of form, of the constancy of experience, be that of nature or mind. But I want to shift our attention now to the way in which Herder understood the development of language to take place, that is, of the way in which he saw this development as an ongoing event, as something whose shape would always emerge in tandem with the habits and conceptual schemes of individual communities located in an individual place. “Each race will bring into its language the sound belonging to its house and family,” he explained, this becomes, in terms of pronunciation, a different dialect. Climate, air and water, food and drink, will have an influence on the linguistic organs and naturally also on language. Society’s ethics and the mighty goddess Habit will soon introduce these peculiarities and those differences in accordance with behavior and decency – this is also a dialect.”¹⁵ As these dialects were brought into proximity, Herder argued, “That word got bent away from the main subject through a secondary viewpoint; here the spirit of the main concept itself changed with the passage of time. There hence arose here distinctive *bendings, diversions, changes [...] transpositions and removals* of whole and half meanings” until suddenly a new idiom is born!¹⁶

Here we can note the manner in which the kind of environmental determinism taken to be at work in the shaping of a people’s *external* morphology,

¹³ JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, Fragments on Recent German Literature [1767–68], edited and translated by Michael Forster in: JOHANN GOTTFRIED VON HERDER, *Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge 2002, p. 62.

¹⁴ JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry [1782–83], see JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, *Werke in zehn Bänden* (hereinafter: *Werke*) Band 5, Frankfurt 1993, p. 962.

¹⁵ HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, p. 148.

¹⁶ HERDER, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, p. 149.

is now said to be exerting a similar pressure in the shaping of the language and character of their inner life. This argument was itself well in line with the kind of philosophical anthropology being developed and taught by Kant already in the 1760s. Herder's innovation was to make language and *Klima* mutually reinforcing in the creation of a people, a move that could offer a genealogical explanation of the peculiar untranslatableability of idioms so far as these once familiar words had branched off their family stem, moving from mere variety, or "dialect," to a different species altogether. As Herder put it, "The mode of representation of each nation is the more deeply imprinted upon it because it is their own, bound to their sky and their earth, sprung from their form of life and inherited from their fathers and forefathers,"¹⁷ thus "Whoever is raised in the same language," he writes, "whoever learns to pour his heart, to express his soul, in it, belongs to the people of this language."¹⁸ It is no accident, therefore, that organic metaphors underlie Herder's conception of cultural identity, for people are most whole and language is most meaningful when both remain rooted in the geographical region in which their original character took shape. So long as a *Volk* remained attached to a specific *Klima*, Herder explained, "one could regard the earth as a garden, where here this human national plant, there that one, blooms in its own shape and nature."¹⁹ Of course, Herder understood the history of human life to be one marked by successive migrations. And he devoted serious discussion to the transformations wrought in the wake of such transplantings. The key to success, as Herder saw it, was the degree to which a people could fuse together their old and new countries. If genuine fusion took place, Herder argued, then a *Volk* could in fact be invigorated, entering a period that he described as the "youthful bloom of nations" and he took most modern societies, which exist in an advanced stage of history, to be the result of this process.²⁰

This approach to language and land as the two forces most jointly productive of a *Volk* has deep implications for the possibilities of interpretation and translation. As Sonia Sikka captures the problem:

Peoples form organic unities because the aspects of a human life are not like mechanical parts that could be separated from one another, and understood independently of one another. Furthermore, literature and art originally give expression to the interwoven fabric of a form of life, and themselves become part of that fabric. Neither they, nor any element

¹⁷ JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind* [1784], see JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, *Werke* 6, Frankfurt 1989, p. 298.

¹⁸ JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* [1793–97], see JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, *Werke* 7, Frankfurt 1991, p. 304.

¹⁹ HERDER, *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, *Werke* 6, pp. 508–509.

²⁰ HERDER, *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, *Werke* 6, p. 509.

of the life they express – including its politics, ethics, religion, and mythology, along with its material and economic conditions – can be interpreted apart from the context of which they are constituents, let alone be resurrected without substantial transformation within a different social and historical context.²¹

Interpretation and translation were nonetheless possible, according to Herder, given the fact of language itself. That is, while interpretation is made much more difficult by the fact that language reflects and shapes the embedded lives of a people, once we learn their language, we have at least the possibility of entering their world. On this basis, Herder developed a program for successful interpretation. Assuming that one had learned the language of a people, the first task was to resist any importation of one's own social and historical framework when interpreting both the meaning of events or texts and the psychology of human actors or authors. Given the connection between language and the *Klima* within which it had developed, Herder believed that the interpreter needed to know not only the language, but indeed needed to feel their way into the lifeworld of the object under consideration. As Michael Forster describes such *Einfühlung*, it is the work done by an interpreter to achieve an imaginative reproduction of their subject's perceptual and affective sensations. As he puts it,

the interpreter should strive to develop their grasp of linguistic usage, contextual facts, and relevant sensations to the point where it achieves something like the same immediacy and automaticness that it had for a text's original author and audience when *they* understood the text in light of such things (so that it acquires for the interpreter, as it had for them, the phenomenology more of a *feeling* than a cognition.²²

Beyond this, Herder insisted, successful interpretation required an examination of the various uses of a given expression or word. This required searching for a phrase in its multiple contexts, across texts, authors, and even genres. Even then, he acknowledged, a faithful translator would discover idioms which defied adequate translation and would thus have to remain untranslated in the text, stubborn linguistic reminders of the radical separation between the lifeworlds of interpreter and text. The final element of interpretation, as Herder saw it, depended upon a set of conjectures or hypotheses advanced by the translator. Here the interpreter advanced a theory regarding the psychology of an author, seeking thereby to “divine” their *intentions*, their sense of the work's belonging to a specific *genre*, and even,

²¹ SONIA SIKKA, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism*, Cambridge 2011, p. 171.

²² MICHAEL FORSTER, Johann Gottfried von Herder, in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/herder/>.

finally, their sense of themselves against the backdrop of their own culture, as either renegade or conformist.

Herder's philosophy of language is thus deeply connected to the philosophical approach he would take to both history and ethnography. Philosophical anthropology as it had been developed by Kant into a discussion of the temperaments of individuals and the character of a nation, was also entwined with an account of the geographic distribution of peoples, and the resultant shaping effects imposed on them by climate and culture. But whereas Kant had fed his anthropology into an understanding of universal history as the inexorable progress of mankind, Herder resisted this, focusing rather on the unique qualities of each successive age and its various peoples. While history, for Herder, indeed saw the advancement of humanity, each culture was already complete in its specific assemblage of ideas and customs. And it is on just this point that we can begin our discussion of Wilhelm von Humboldt. For not only did Humboldt accept Herder's claims regarding the role played by language in the formation of a people, Humboldt took his own task to lie in the service of this insight to the extent that he sought to provide a set of empirical investigations into the comparative linguistic structures of nations, enquiries which not only complemented Herder's theories but indeed provided them with empirical support. But Humboldt had arrived at the question of language only *after* he had studied Kant, *after* he had spent a year studying anthropology in Göttingen, and *after* he had moved to Jena and worked together with Schiller and Goethe in their efforts to reinvigorate German cultural identity along the lines proposed by Herder himself, insofar as Weimar Classicism can certainly be said to represent in part the productive fusion of Greek and German thought.

These detours on Humboldt's path are significant, I think, for understanding the manner in which Humboldt would develop Herder's program. This emerges most clearly perhaps in the account of cognition. I have already put the basics of Herder's discussion in a Kantian idiom here so far as I have said that sense and intellect work together in the genesis of language and thereby also in the construction of the lifeworld as a place of meaning and reference. Indeed, experience is so thoroughly saturated by linguistic construction, for Herder, that he has followed Kant also in being charged with the specter of idealism. As for Humboldt, he not only agreed with Herder regarding the constitutive nature of language, he was willing to adapt Kant's mature theory of cognition to explain it. This occurred in two ways. First, Humboldt assigned the Kantian categories of understanding to specific tasks in the construction of language; because these categories were universal in this labour, moreover, he argued for the existence of a universal grammar that could be discerned beneath the world's linguistic diversity. As

he described this at one point, “Since the natural disposition to language is universal in man, and everyone must possess the key to the understanding of all languages, it follows automatically that the form of all languages must be essentially the same, and always achieve the universal purpose.”²³ As Humboldt worked through Kant’s table, he assigned the category of “relation” to the construction of verb forms. Indeed, the specific categories of relation will yield the main grammatical cases: the category of causality yields the nominative, the accusative, and the instrumental; the category of substance and accident yields the genitive; and the category of reciprocity (which Humboldt calls “double relation”) yields the dative.²⁴ The human mind is a rule-governed system, according to Humboldt, and the rules that order it are what he referred to collectively as “the universal forms of intuition and the logical ordering of concepts,”²⁵ a set of rules “concerning spatial and temporal relations, personhood and gender, predication, conjunction, and modality.”²⁶

Apart from the transformation of Kant’s transcendental logic into categories for the possibility of linguistic experience, however, Humboldt also borrows from Kant’s belief that reason is epigenetic, that it is a self-forming, free activity; *eine Selbstthätigkeit* in its autochthonous construction of both self and world. Kant had been led to an understanding of the epigenesis of reason through his effort to understand the origin of ideas, an origin that, as he saw it, could not lie in either the empiricist’s recourse to sensation or the rationalist’s appeal to innate ideas.²⁷ As I have already put the point earlier, while the empiricists required the assumption of mental rules to account for the stability of form, the rationalists were dependent upon divinity for their truths, gaining certainty, therefore, at the cost of a radical contingency, since, as any reader of Descartes knows, the difference between an evil genius and a beneficent God can be difficult to prove. With the epigenesis of reason, Kant could argue that it was through reason alone that the logical structures of thought were generated, providing a fixity of form even as they went to work on an ocean of impressions received from sense. As Humboldt expresses this in terms of his philosophy of language, he writes that,

²³ WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, translated by Peter Heath, edited by Michael Losonsky, Cambridge 1999, p. 215.

²⁴ FORSTER, *German Philosophy of Language*, p. 124.

²⁵ WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, translated by Peter Heath, with Introduction by Hans Aarsleff, Cambridge 1988, p. 81.

²⁶ HUMBOLDT, *On Language* (1988), p. 84.

²⁷ I discuss this point at length in: JENNIFER MENSCH, *Kant’s Organicism: Epigenesis and the Development of Critical Philosophy*, Chicago 2013.

If we are not to forego all discovery of a connection between phenomena in the human race, then we must look for some independent and original cause, not itself in turn conditioned and transitory in appearance. But we are then most naturally led to an inner life-principle, freely developing in its fullness, whose particular manifestations are not therefore intrinsically unlinked just because their outer appearances are presented in isolation.²⁸

It was this unconditioned, inner life-principle, according to Humboldt, that gave rise to the universal grammar underlying each of its particular linguistic manifestations. ‘From finite means, infinite uses,’ was the way Humboldt would capture this, and indeed this plasticity was itself productive since each manifestation could be traced back to the origin in the life principle. As Humboldt described it, the products of the life principle are not mere foundations on which further construction can be effected, but

carry within them at the same time the rekindling breath that engenders them. They propagate life, because it is from full life that they proceed. For the power that produces them works with the tension of its whole endeavor and in its full unity, yet at the same time truly creatively, regarding its own procreation as something inexplicable even to itself.²⁹

Kant too had resisted further speculation into the means by which reason gave birth to itself, and like Humboldt as well, he understood that it was the unity of reason which could alone ground the thoroughgoing unity of experience.

Even as he adopted the Kantian framework in this way, Humboldt still took himself to be offering an extension of Herder’s philosophy of language. Humboldt agreed with Herder on all of the following points: that thought is bounded by language, that language is best understood by the way in which it constructs a lifeworld, and not, therefore as a merely instrumental system of signs for things in the world. He agreed with Herder that the investigation of other cultures must begin with their language because this was the key to discovering their particular world view. In his words, “Language is, as it were, the outer appearance of the spirit of a people; the language is their spirit and the spirit their language; we can never think of them sufficiently as identical.”³⁰ And finally, he agreed with Herder on the critical role played by hearing for generating an external representation, of a sound that in its articulation became concrete, and that in reflecting the speaker back to themselves, made them concrete as well. “The activity of the senses must combine synthetically with the inner action of the mind,” Humboldt explained,

²⁸ HUMBOLDT, *On Language* (1999), p. 26.

²⁹ HUMBOLDT, *On Language* (1999), p. 29.

³⁰ HUMBOLDT, *On Language* (1999), p. 46.

and from this combination the idea is ejected, becomes an object vis-à-vis the subjective power, and, perceived anew as such, returns back into the latter. But *language* is indispensable for this. For this mental striving breaks out through the lips in language, the product of that striving returns back to the speaker's ear. Thus the idea becomes transformed into real objectivity, without being deprived of subjectivity on that account. Only language can do this; and without this transformation, occurring constantly with the help of language even in silence, into an objectivity that returns to the subject, the act of concept-formation, and with it all true thinking is impossible.³¹

It was this approach to concept formation that led Humboldt to the conclusion that *inflected* languages – with the best example of this being Sanskrit, in his mind – that these languages were better adapted to the conceptualization of experience and thus exerted shaping effects that could be demonstrably traced through to the formation of a nation's cultural output. As Helmut Müller-Sievers describes this, for Humboldt

The 'best' language is that in which the phonetic material has been bent and split most thoroughly by the intellectual force, in which even the smallest units still carry meaning so that they can be arranged in the most variegated, or most individual way. The smaller the significant units, the less meaningless debris, the better a language is able to accommodate the inexhaustible meaningfulness of the mind. This is the reason why for Humboldt, Chinese, with its large, solid blocks of significance, is not as 'good' as Sanskrit, the most supple of all languages.³²

Now while I do not have the space left in this particular discussion to develop the point fully, I want to at least identify this effort to rank languages and indeed, as Humboldt saw it, the concomitant mental development and cultural artifacts of a nation, as something that was central to German anthropology in these years. That is, while Humboldt was studying philology in Göttingen in 1787–88, he also took courses from two of the leading anatomist-*cum*-anthropologists of the day: Sömmering and Blumenbach. Göttingen historians like Schlözer had been busy developing an ethnographic approach to studying foreign cultures since the mid-1760s – work that had had a profound effect on Herder's approach – but in the 1780s it was the medical faculty instead who were pushing the direction of anthropology toward the creation of a racial biometrics that could physically catalogue the varieties of mankind. This was, for the most part, a taxonomical exercise, and while some practitioners were clearly *also* racists, the fact is that all of these researchers took the task of comparative anatomy to be a necessary scientific exercise. And virtually all of them found it unproblematic to rank the varieties of mankind on aesthetic grounds, such that it was not uncommon, for example, to find swooning accounts of the symmetry on display

³¹ HUMBOLDT, *On Language* (1999), p. 56.

³² HELMUT MÜLLER-SIEVERS, *Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy, and Literature around 1800*, Stanford 1997, p. 115.

in the Caucasian skull.³³ Humboldt was part of this way of thinking so far as he saw no inconsistency in arguing, on the one hand, that while languages might be ranked, this should never be done with respect to people, and, on the other hand, opening this argument with an overview of the Malayan peoples, ‘an energetic, light-skinned people,’ whose existence created a scientific puzzle, given their close geographical proximity to the ‘ugly blacks of New Holland,’ a people representing the ‘lowest level of human mental development.’ Comparative morphology would lead its investigators down a number of tracks during the 19th century, from the transcendental morphologists inspired by Goethe’s work on archetypal structures, to Haeckel’s recapitulation theory. Indeed Darwin himself thought comparative morphology to be “the most interesting department of natural history, and may be said to be its very soul.”³⁴ As Darwin came to think about the evolution of species it was comparative linguistics, however, and the work done by Humboldt in particular, that provided a central piece of the puzzle. For it was Humboldt who had proposed that we think of languages as organic beings, and that we view the families of languages along genealogical lines. His arguments for a universal grammar, of some unifying structure underlying and connecting the whole web of its individual productions, was critical for Darwin’s thinking as he struggled to link together the manifold diversity of life. Which brings us full circle, I think, in a discussion that began with Herder’s efforts to locate the origin of language, to describe it as a human production without any tincture of the supernatural. Herder’s theories marked a step away from metaphysics and toward the human sciences, opening up the field of hermeneutics and setting the stage for a set of investigations that would lead, through Humboldt, to the origin of mankind.

Summary

In this paper I trace the manner in which Herder’s philosophy of language grounds his approach to hermeneutical issues regarding history, interpretation, and translation. Herder’s approach to the question of language has been repeatedly lauded for its import-

³³ This is chronicled especially well by N.I. Painter in: NELL IRVIN PAINTER, *The History of White People*, New York 2010. J. Mikkelsen collects together many of the key contemporary anthropological writers on this topic in *Kant and the Concept of Race in: JON M. MIKKELSEN, Late Eighteenth-Century Writings*, Albany 2013. I discuss Kant’s efforts to use his own “philosophical anthropology” as a guide for practicing physical anthropologists in JENNIFER MENSCH, *Kant and the Skull Collectors: German Anthropology from Blumenbach to Kant*, in: Corey W. Dyck/Falk Wunderlich (eds.), *Kant and his German Contemporaries*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 192–210.

³⁴ CHARLES DARWIN, *The Origin of Species*, London 1859, p. 434.

ant influence on the later work done by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer, but in this discussion I am going to put him more directly in conversation with Wilhelm von Humboldt. Although recent critics have derided Humboldt's theory as both derivative and wrong, I will argue that we should instead recognize that Humboldt's philosophy of language represents a significant development of Herder's thesis. This development is accomplished by way of Humboldt's application of Kant's mature theory of reason to a program for comparative linguistics. In Humboldt's hands, this amounts to a new strain of philosophical anthropology.

Zusammenfassung

Der Aufsatz stellt dar, auf welche Weise Herders Sprachphilosophie seine Herangehensweise an Probleme der Philosophie der Geschichte, der Interpretation und der Übersetzung begründet. Gemeinhin wird Herders Sprachphilosophie vor allem als wichtige Quelle späterer Arbeiten von Schleiermacher, Dilthey und Gadamer gewertet. Hier geht es mir jedoch darum, Herder in der zeitgenössischen Auseinandersetzung mit Wilhelm von Humboldt zu diskutieren, denn Humboldts Sprachphilosophie wird gegenwärtig als unoriginell und falsch abgetan. Dagegen versuche ich zu zeigen, dass sie eine wesentliche Weiterentwicklung der Theorie Herders darstellt: Humboldt entwickelt aus der kantischen Vernunftkonzeption das Programm einer vergleichenden Linguistik, durch welche aus der Sprachphilosophie Herders ein eigener Strang der philosophischen Anthropologie wird.