Language as Encoding Thought vs. Language as Medium of Thought:
On the Question of J. G. Fichte's Influence on Wilhelm von Humboldt

In the epilogue to his book, *Language and German Idealism: Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy,*[1] Jere Paul Surber requests that more work be done on the question of the influence of J. G. Fichte's theory of language on other (more or less) contemporary theories of language. Specifically he asks about Fichte's possible influence on Wilhelm von Humboldt.

> There is indisputable evidence that Wilhelm von Humboldt spent several of his formative years in direct contact with Fichte's views on language *after* his acquaintance with Herder's writings and *before* his sojourn among the Parisian "ideologues" at the end of the century. This strongly suggests the need for further research into possible conceptual connections between Humboldt's later formulation of his "scientific comparative methods" and the linguistic ideas of Fichte, particularly with respect to the project of founding linguistics upon a "scientific" or "systematic" philosophical basis.[2]

In this essay I will consider precisely that question of the influence of Fichte on Humboldt; it would seem to be a historical question more than a philosophical question, but the situation is not that simple.

Here is what we know. In 1794 Fichte and Humboldt both came to Jena. Fichte was the new rising star in philosophy—Hölderlin said of him, "Fichte is now the soul of Jena and thank God that he is. I have never before known a man of such profundity and energy of intellect"[3]—while Humboldt was a young man cultivating his intellect. What brought Humboldt to Jena was not Fichte, but Friedrich Schiller. Schiller and he had long been acquaintances and their wives "had dreamed … that their families might live near each other in close intimacy."[4] In 1794 Schiller committed himself to producing the journal *Die Horen* and enlisted both Humboldt and Fichte as editors. It was in this journal in 1794 that Fichte published his only work explicitly on language, "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language" ("Von der Sprachfähigkeit

und dem Ursprung der Sprache").[5] Humboldt also knew his views both from attending Fichte's lectures, "Über Geist und Buchstaben in der Philosophie," and from being dragged by Fichte into the debate between him and Schiller over *Die Horen* publishing of a revision of these lectures. Hunboldt's knowledge of Fichte was broad enough that he was approached by Gottfried Hufeland to write a review article of Fichte's writings in *Allgemeine Litteratur Zeitung*, and he wrote of Fichte,

> Because of his tremendous workload, I do not see Fichte often, but I admire him immensely because of his immense speculative mind. … The theoretical part of the *Grundlage der Gesamten Wissenschaft* has now been published. There has perhaps never been anything more acute or more penetrating.[6]

Sometime after his exposure to Fichte's article on the origin of language, Humboldt wrote "Über Denken and Sprechen"[7]—a collection of sixteen statements on the relationship between thought and language.

In 1797 Humboldt traveled to Paris and spent significant time with the Idéologues. It is this interaction that Hans Aarsleff claims serves as the impetus for Humboldt's linguistic theory.

> The Paris diaries show that Humboldt spent much time in the company of the men and women who represented the intellectual and philosophical life of the day. He formed a close friendship with Mme de Staël (continued in an extensive correspondence), often visited Diderot's daughter Marie Vandeul, had lively and frequent discussions with Condorcet's widow, and was regularly a guest at the house of the aging Mme Helvétius at Auteuil, where since long before the revolution she had kept the salon that is known as the Society of Auteuil, aptly called the Port Royal of the *idéologues*. … Humboldt's sudden turn to linguistic anthropology occurred in this milieu. He took over not merely an orientation but also basic principles that form the core of his linguistic philosophy. All that he later wrote on this subject shows how heavy his debt was. In this sense Humboldt was one of the *idéologues*.[8]

But as to whether the Idéologues were Humboldt's main influence is widely disputed. In rebuttal to Aarsleff, Paul Sweet unearths a series of disparaging comments made by Humboldt against Antoine Destutt de Tracy and Étienne de Condillac. Humboldt's repeated criticism was that the French lacked a sufficiently metaphysical spirit—precisely the criticism we should expect from one who was engaged in the fruitless attempt to introduce Kant and Fichte to the empiricist, proto-positivist Idéologues. Wulf Oesterreicher points out that all of Humboldt's writings on Condillac are critical and that we should look to Johann Gottfried Herder as the fundamental source of Humboldt's ideas.[9]

If Oesterreicher is right, given Fichte's virulent attacks on Herder, it would be surprising if Fichte exerted a great influence. Yet both Sweet and Aarsleff argue strongly against the suggestion that Herder was a main influence on Humboldt. They point out that Herder's name appears infrequently in Humboldt's notes and letters.[10] To add to the confusion Eduard Spranger and Ernst Cassirer argue that Humboldt's primary intellectual debt is to Kant and Karl–Heinz Weimann argues against the Kant reading emphasizing instead Humboldt's intellectual debt to Locke. If, however, Locke was the key influence on Humboldt, it was most likely via the Idéologues.

Much of the debate would seem to be resolved by the 1795 essay "Über Sprechen und Denken," but, in fact, the date of the essay is in question. The dating of this article is important since (1) it is usually taken to be Humboldt's earliest reflections on language, and (2) part of the motivation for dating the article 1795 is the influence of Fichte's 1794 "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language." Many believe that if the dating of the article could be placed, the prime influence of Humboldt's *Sprachphilosophie* could be ascertained.[11] Those who argue that Humboldt's main influences were German (Herder, Kant, Fichte) argue for the given dating; those who argue that Humboldt's main philosophical influences came from France argue that this piece is misdated. Aarsleff claims it was written around 1800; Sweet agrees, but for different reasons. Sweet claims that Humboldt's *Sprachphilosophie* got its motivation from his encounters with Degérando's 1799 *Des Signes* during his trip to the Basque regions of Spain in

late 1799, and his reading of Bernhardi's *Sprachlehre* in 1801. Against those who date the essay after 1795 it should be pointed out that the fact that the Humboldt's linguistic project took shape only after 1800 does not imply that he could not have jotted down sixteen sentences on his thoughts on language in 1795 perhaps as a direct result of reading Fichte's 1794–95 essay on language.

Among these debates about the philosophical influences on Humboldt, how do things stand with the case for Fichte's influence? Not well, I am afraid. Although we know that Humboldt knew Fichte personally, read his work, argued on Fichte's behalf against the Paris Idéologues, and that Humboldt claimed a debt to Bernhardi, a close friend of Fichte's, we also know that in 1803 Humboldt wrote

> Fichte's absolute ego (I speak merely from memory) was to me always contrary and obscure, because to me it appeared to sublate the actual egos and to hypostatize a thoroughly chimerical one. Of Schelling's pantheism I have scarcely the slightest idea. But if you tell me that in each metaphysics there is a more solid and secure point from which one proceeds, and a more obscure point (though not less secure) to which one proceeds, then I think that Fichte takes as first that which is actually last, the absolute particular ego.[12]

So Humboldt was skeptical of Fichte's account of the ego, the cornerstone of his entire philosophical system.

With respect to these historical debates about Humboldt's influences the evidence is terminally ambiguous. Perhaps the best that can be said is something like this: Humboldt was neither a systematic philosopher, nor a systematic reader, nor a systematic commentator on others' works. He was, however, personally involved with many philosophers who were themselves systematic readers, thinkers, and engagers. The result is that Humboldt was exposed to a wide variety of ideas, and, according to his intellectual temperament, leaned toward metaphysical speculation, but without venturing too far from empirical evidence. He assimilated some of these influences together in such a way to develop some central philosophical concepts

from which he developed his linguistic theory. The influences are all there, but he belongs to no school. Still, this only addresses the historical question.

Part of the problem of tracking down philosophical antecedents is that you must not only track down the historical connection but the conceptual one as well. We can still ask the question of whether a theory of language, organized and argued as Humboldt's is, could be the direct product of an essay organized and argued as Fichte's. Are the central ideas in Fichte's essay on language similar enough to the ideas in Humboldt's essay to warrant the claim that Fichte philosophically influenced Humboldt? My conclusion is they are not. There are features that distinguish their theories of language to such a degree that we can confidently conclude that the influence was minimal. Now just the fact that Fichte's theory is not the sort of theory likely to influence Humboldt is by itself, not a very interesting conclusion. After all, Fichte did not influence a great number of philosophers. However, it turns out the difference between Fichte's and Humboldt's theories of language is useful for distinguishing two categorically different theories of language: those that focus on language primarily as a means of communication, and those that focus on language primarily as a vehicle of thought. Michael Dummett puts the question quite succinctly.

> Language, it is natural to say, has two principle functions: that of an instrument of communication, and that of a vehicle of thought. We are therefore impelled to ask which of the two is primary. Is it because language is an instrument of communication that it can also serve as a vehicle of thought? Or, is it conversely, because it is a vehicle of thought, and can therefore express thoughts, that it can be used by one person to communicate his thoughts to others?[13]

This distinction has implications for views on the development of language (especially with respect to personal pronouns), and views on the nature of understanding.

The question of the origin of language may strike many contemporary thinkers as an odd one, certainly an odd one for philosophy to attempt to adjudicate. However the answers to the *Ursprungsfrage* always include views on the relationship between language and reason. For

example, is language necessary for rational thought? If so, what is the effect of language on thinking? In addition, the debate establishes the discipline appropriate for understanding the nature of language, be it philosophical, empirical, or even theological. J. P. Süssmilch argued both that humans need language for the use of reason, and that language must be the effect of a rational cause. Since humans could not acquire their ability to reason prior to the emergence of language, and since reason is required for the creation of language, language must have originated in another, non-human rational source—God.[14] The study of language and reason belongs n the end to theology. In his 1772 prize-winning essay, Herder countered this by arguing that language and reason developed together over time, and thus we do not need to appeal to divine providence as an explanation.[15] Both Fichte and Humboldt follow Herder in arguing that language and reason develop together, and thus what is needed is a philosophically guided history of the development of reason. To see why it is Humbold'ts view is not the kind of view one would expect to derive from Fichte's view, we need to know more about Fichte's view of language.

Surber makes the following claim: "One will look in vain for any discussion of a direct influence by Fichte at the beginning of Humboldt's reflections upon language, since these histories seem totally unaware of even the existence of Fichte's essay and widely attended lectures on the subject."[16] Regularly Surber points out that the influence of Fichte on Humboldt's early development is "passed over" by commentators on Humboldt; in support of his case Surber lays out three points Fichte makes such that "if one were to seek the roots of the methodological spirit, if not the details, of Wilhelm von Humboldt's linguistic research, they appear here [in Fichte] far more so than in Herder, Kant, or the French tradition."[17] The three points are that

> [First] Fichte clearly saw that grammatical considerations are directly relevant to philosophical issues. … [Second] Fichte was the first to and probably the only modern Idealist philosopher to envision a general strategy whereby a reconstruction of grammatical determinations could be used for both to reinforce and to defend a theoretical project otherwise vulnerable to "metacritical" attack.

> … [And third] Fichte seems to have realized the limitations of the sort of vague or mystified empirical generalizations about language that dominated most of the eighteenth century preceding him, as well as to have anticipated the nineteenth-century traditions of linguistics that sought to explore connection among observed features of existing languages, their underlying structural and grammatical similarities and derivations, and the philosophical assumptions upon which these inquiries rested.[18]

Although both Fichte and Humboldt share the philosophical importance of the grammatical features of language, the way they are important varies and suggests instead that the influence is not as Surber suggests. To get clear on their differences, in spirit and in letter, we need to look closely at both thinker's views.

Fichte makes it clear from the start of his essay "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language" that the project of discovering the origin of language is not an empirical project, but rather one of "deriving the necessity of this invention [language] from the nature of human reason; [that is to say] one must demonstrate that and how language must have been invented."[19] Already Fichte is locating himself in the debate about the origin of language. The three base answers to the question of the origin of language I'll call innatism, conventionalism, and divine providence. The innatists, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argued that language was innate in human nature; the conventionalists, like Locke and Condillac, argued that language was invented by humans and the meanings were eventually fixed through convention; the divine providentialists, like Süssmilch, argued that God gave humans their linguistic capacity. At stake in the differences between these views are the limits of philosophical investigation vis-à-vis empirical investigations on the one side and faith on the other. The innatists concluded that we should seek philosophical explanations of the origin of language; conventionalists argued that empirical, comparative linguistics is best suited to answer the question; and divine providentialists claimed that it is a question of faith. In the above quotation Fichte is splitting his allegiance between the innatists and the conventionalists. He argues that, on the one hand,

language develops necessarily from the nature of human reason, thus he is partially an innatist; yet, on the other hand, it is still an invention, thus he is partially a conventionalist.[20] Contrary to other conventionalists, his methodology is not empirical ("one might think that since I can call a book 'liber', 'βʹιβλιοη,' 'buch,' and so forth, one nation must have agreed to name its particular object 'buch' another 'liber', and so on. But we should not put much stock in such a agreement, since it is most improbable"[21]). Contrary to other innatists, he argues that language is constructed out of "arbitrary signs" *[willkürliche Zeichen]* rather than natural cries ("the involuntary eruption of emotion is not language"[22]). In fact his definition is: "*Language,* in the broadest sense of the word, *is the expression of our thoughts by means of arbitrary signs.*"[23] By definition, then, Fichte eliminates the version of innatism that places the origin of language in the instinctual expressions of emotions. Fichte does acknowledge that communication can occur through instinctual expressions of emotion (we can often tell someone's feelings by their facial expressions), but this communication cannot yet be considered linguistic since it does not yet operate through signs. Nor is communication the *function* of involuntary expression.

> For anything that can properly be called language, one must intend absolutely nothing more than the signification of thought; and language has no purpose whatsoever beyond this signification, … no other purpose than that of occasioning the representation of a particular object in the other person.[24]

This rules out instinctual actions, but not such signifying gestures as pointing or drawing a representation of something (signs used specifically for the purpose of communicating thoughts). This is what Fichte means by saying the signs must be "arbitrary" *[willkürlich]*. Since the first function of reason is to serve purposeful action—that is, to find the appropriate means to willed ends—the choice involved in expressing one's thoughts through signs is a product of reason. Consequently, Fichte can claim that reason is the ultimate source for the motivation for the invention of language.[25] Before Herder's essay, this would be a sufficient account of the origin of language. Herder's central claim, however, is that one must explain the ability to recognize

sounds as signs in the first place. Fichte therefore needs to show that the very idea of presenting one's thought in language arises from the nature of reason.[26]

Fichte first examines the way that reason operates as such. He claims, "it is fundamental to man's very essence that he seeks to subjugate the power of nature. The first expression of his own power is directed toward nature in order to shape it to his own ends."[27] The general drive under which humans try to subjugate nature follows "the highest principle in man": "Be always at one with yourself."[28] This drive is "interwoven through his entire being and without any contribution of his free will" and functions to make everything "harmonize with his reason, since only under that condition can he come into harmony with himself."[29] Since "nature resists his efforts and often enough rejects it altogether … we are in constant warfare with nature."[30] The same relationship of constant warfare does not exist, however, between human beings. Fichte's argument is that if it were the case that everyone constantly tried to subjugate others to their own will then there would be "a war of all against all." Since humans actually do get along, "in the primordial nature of man a principle must be discernible which makes him behave differently towards others of his own kind than he behaves toward nature." When one encounters another already rational person "he will be glad to have met with a being attuned to himself—another human being."[31] Instead of trying to shape them to our ends, we see others persons as potential partners in our attempt to submit nature to our ends.[32] As a result of the awareness of others as rational, the drive to subjugate nature, guided by "the highest principle in man," produces language.[33]

At the heart of this view is the idea that we can have thoughts prior to their realization in language. Fichte writes:

> I do not prove here that man does not think without language and that without it he could have had no universal abstract concepts. He is capable of this simply by means of the pictures which he projects by his imagination. It is my conviction that language has been held to be much too important if one believed that without it no use of reason at all would have occurred.[34]

Humboldt holds the contrary view—that we need language as a medium of thought. Let's turn to that view found in the early "On Thinking and Speaking."

Humboldt's first claim is that "(1) The essence of thinking consists in reflecting, i. e., in distinguishing the thinking from that which is thought about."[35] That is to say, the essence of thinking rests in its function to present an object to consciousness in a manner that differs from the object as given in perception. In the latter case, the object is given in the world; in the former case, it is given in the mind of the subject. In order to re-present this object to consciousness "(2) the mind must … stand still for an instant to gather what was just represented into a unity and in this manner to posit it as an object against itself [as a subject]."[36] The subject unifies the perceptual manifold isolating one object from the background of sensations. According to Humboldt, this requires comparing many formed unities, separating and combining them into a unified object: "(4) The essence of thinking consists, therefore, in making sub-divisions in its own course; thereby to form totalities out of certain portions of its own activity; and these formations singly among themselves, but all together as objects, to posit against the thinking subject."[37] In order to go about this process of forming unities the subject must be guided by certain principles or ideals that dictate which particular sensations become unified as objects. These he calls "the universal forms of sensibility [*Sinnlichkeit*]." "(5) No thinking, not even the purest can take place without the aid of the universal forms of sensibility; only in them can we comprehend the object and, as it were, hold it fast [before consciousness]."[38] "Sensibility" is as ambiguous of a word as its German counterpart, *Sinnlichkeit*. It connotes intelligibility and meaningfulness, but also emphasizes the sensuous character of that intelligibility. It denotes the availability of the object to our physical senses.[39] Humboldt thinks that sensibility is necessary for all thinking, even the most "pure" thinking. The obvious question is the source of these forms of sensibility. Here Humboldt claims that "(6) [n]ow, the sensuous [*sinnlich*] signification of units, into which certain portions of thinking are united, in order to be posited as parts against other parts of a bigger totality, as objects to the subject, is called in the broadest understanding of the word: language."[40] Language is the means by which reflection can divide up the world into

objects. One could not have reflection without language, nor could one have language without reflection. This relationship between language and reflection is quite different than Fichte's, and, quite frankly, as it stands it would seem to be false. Infants can certainly recognize things as objects before they can understand language, therefore (one might say) the reflective power of thought to produce unities in the manifold must be able to operate without language.

The key to answering this objection is signaled in the concluding statement of the first argument.

> (7) The language therefore begins immediately and at once with the first act of reflection, and just as man awakens from the dimness of lust, in which the subject swallows the object, to self-consciousness, the word is also there—as it were the first impetus which man gives to himself, suddenly to standstill, to look around, to orient himself.[41]

According to Humboldt, it is not merely isolating an object in the perceptual field, and differentiating that object in the mind from that object in the world, but also being self-aware as oriented in the world toward the objects of the world. That is, it involves the awareness of ourselves as objects in the world as well as subjects for whom the world exists. Infants, although being aware of objects in the world, are not aware of themselves as being aware—they are not reflexively aware. Humboldt holds the more sophisticated view that language is necessary for this objectifying relation to oneself and the world.

In the last clause of the above quotation he says that language is "the first impetus which man gives to himself, suddenly to stand still, to look around, to orient himself"—in other words, to reflect. Contrary to Fichte's view that we develop language to communicate our purposes to others—an activity that is clearly posterior to the reflective appropriation of the world—Humboldt says that language is the "impetus" to our attempt to reflectively appropriate the world. The German word translated as "impetus" is *Anstoss*.[42] Language, on Humboldt's account is the *Anstoss*. It summons us to reflectively take up the world and ourselves as objects, and it determines our reflective powers by being the source of "the universal forms of sensibility."

The second conclusion is that linguistic signs are differentiated primarily as sounds. Humboldt writes,

> (11) The most cutting of all the changes in time are those which the voice produces. … (12) The language-signs are therefore necessarily sounds and … man was bound, as soon as he recognized clearly an object as separate from himself, immediately to pronounce also the sound which was to signify it.[43]

There are two important points here. First, communication is elevated to being more than the expression of thought, rather the sharing of sounds becomes the means by which reflection is accomplished. When we recognize anything we instinctively say the name of that thing, at least to ourselves; In this respect, we may say that on Humboldt's view language plays the role of narrating reflection. When we are aware of something we designate our awareness of it to ourselves by expressing it in words. The second point is his emphasis on the activity of dialogue as the telos of language. Thirty years later he would write,

> There lies in the primordial nature of language an unalterable dualism, and the very possibility of speech is conditioned by address and response. Even thinking is essentially accompanied by the inclination toward social existence, and one … longs for a *Thou* which will correspond to his *I*. Concepts seem to attain definition and certainty for him only when they are reflected by a thinking power other than his own.[44]

Contained in the idea of objectivity is the possibility of being for many subjects, thus it is only through the actuality of the object being for many subjects that the objectivity of the object is established. Language is an intersubjective medium, and therefore anything designated in language is intersubjectively recognizable, yet anything which is articulated anew into language, and as a result comes to "attain definition and certainty" for the first time, must be recognized and verified by someone else as being such. We can see emerging what will become Humboldt's most famous claim about language.

> Language, taken as real, is something which constantly and in every moment passes away. Even its preservation in writing is only an incomplete mummified depository which needs, for full understanding, an imaginative oral reconstruction. Language is not a product [*ergon*] but an activity [*energia*].[45]

Language is not something static (as Fichte thought), but exists only in the activity of communicatively expressing ourselves to one another. Returning to the main issue, there are two ways in which language functions in thinking: as the means by which we individuate objects for reflection, and as the means by which we establish the objectivity of the objects. In both cases the focus remains on the spoken word.[46]

What we find in Humboldt and Fichte are not simply differences between theories of the origin of language and theories of the relationship between thought and language, but different types of theories of language altogether. Let's consider two consequences that fall out of their respective theories of language: their theories of the place of pronouns in the development of language, and their theories of the process of communicative understanding. Fichte claims that nouns develop first in a language, and then pronouns arise to replace nouns. He writes,

> The *various person*s of the *verbs* were undoubtedly constructed in the following order. The *person* first signified in language was certainly the *third*, for originally this was the only person in which anyone spoke. Everyone was called by his proper name: "N. shall do this!" After the third, it was the *second person* that came to have a special signification, since in agreements and contracts one soon felt the need to say to the other: "*You* shall do this." The *'I'* as the *first person*, especially where it is attached to the ending of the verb itself, evidences a higher rational culture and was thus signified last. We see that children always speak of themselves in the third person and refer to themselves as the subject of which the want to speak by their names. This is because they have not yet arrived at the concept of the *'I,'* at the separation of the self from everything outside of them. *'I'* expresses the highest character of reason.[47]

For Fichte, the supreme idealist, the *I* is the highest point of reason and thus could be present only in societies capable of the highest forms of reasoning. In an 1829 essay, "On the Relationship of the Locative Adverbs with the Personal Pronouns in a Few Language," Humboldt presents what is essentially Fichte's view using one of Fichte's own examples. "We notice that children for a long time use names and other objective relations in place of pronouns. This has lead to the claim that the pronoun has always developed late in language in general."[48] Yet, responds Humboldt, "this claim is not expressed correctly. The pronoun in the language must be originary."[49] Rather than nouns preceding pronouns, Humboldt claims that pronouns have a linguistic priority over nouns. What makes this seem odd, is that pronouns seem to function first and foremost as substitutes for nouns. Therefore we would expect that nouns would precede pronouns. Humboldt's claim is that such a conclusion results from an incomplete analysis of language. In order to fully understand the "inner" nature of language we need to analyze the pragmatic function of words in speech.[50] The motivation here is the view that the only way language can serve as an intersubjectively shared medium of communication is if it serves as an adequate medium for the expression of thoughts. According to Humboldt, when we consider language in its expressive function rather than as an object, we find that

> "I" does not refer to that [concrete object] which manifests specific characteristics within specific spatial relationships, but rather that which is right now in the consciousness of an opposing subject. ... Likewise with "you" and "he": all are hypostatised relational concepts.[51]

The pronoun *I* does not replace a noun, but designates the position of the speaker within dialogue. The *I* is the one who speaks; the *Thou* is the one who is spoken to. The expressive role of the pronoun is to indicate the relations between the interlocutors. This is not to say that pronouns cannot stand for nouns—they often do—only that one of the essential functions of pronouns in speech is irreducible to the function of standing in for other nouns.[52] How we are going to view the importance of personal pronouns will vary according to whether we think the primary function of language is to encode thought, or to be the medium of thought.

The differences in their theories of language will carry over into differences in their theories of the process of communicative understanding. In the lectures collected under the title "Concerning the Difference Between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy" Fichte addresses the process of communication.[53] Since "spirits are unable to affect each other immediately,"[54] Fichte claims that communicative understanding occurs when one accurately interprets the noises made by another person as representatives of thoughts.

> Taken in themselves, my words are no more than an empty noise, a movement in the air which surrounds us. I do not give them whatever meaning they have for you (assuming they make rational sense to you). You place a meaning in these words for yourself, just as I place a meaning in them for myself. The more closely the meaning you place in them approximates the meaning I wished to place in them, the better you understand me.[55]

Humboldt, to the contrary, argues that communication is quite literally thinking together. He writes, "The mutual interdependence of thought and word illuminates clearly the truth that languages are not really means for representing already known truths rather instruments for discovering previously unrecognized ones."[56] The words are meaningful already, and communication—the sharing of words—is then a shared activity of discovering of the world and locating oneself in the world. What we have here are examples of two fundamentally different approaches to the nature of language. The authors were aware of the extent and the implications of these differences and as such we can conclude that Fichte's theory of language is not the sort of theory of language that would philosophically influence a theory of language like Humboldt's. Fichte and Fichtean views may have provided a context for Humboldt's initial investigations into the nature of language, but did not influence the content of Humboldt's views.

Yet, there is another possible place of influence on Humboldt by Fichte. Recall that Surber's question draws specific attention to "possible conceptual connections between Humboldt's later formulation of his 'scientific comparative methods' and the linguistic ideas of Fichte, particularly with respect to the project of founding linguistics upon a 'scientific' or

‘systematic’ philosophical basis.”[57] Might it be the case that although their views on the nature of language differed, they shared a view about what a proper *Sprach-Wissenschaft* entailed? I'm afraid not. To see this we will need to look more closely at their respective understandings of what it would mean to scientifically or philosophically ground linguistics; again (perhaps unsurprisingly) their differing views on the nature of language will shape their views on what constitutes a scientific analysis of language.

Fichte's account of science has two parts, systematicity and apodicticity. He writes: “A science possesses systematic form. All the propositions of a science are joined together in a single first principle in which they unite to form a whole.”[58] The “first principle” must be “prior to and independent of the science” that it unites. That is to say, the principle cannot belong to the science itself. If a region of study can meet these criteria, it is a science. It is clear from Fichte’s presentation of the origin of language and the development of grammar that he believes the study of the *Ursprache* can have such scientific status. Recall he claims one must “deriv[e] the necessity of this invention from the nature of human reason; one must demonstrate that and how language must have been invented”[59] and this derivation begins from the “highest principle of man”—“Be always at one with yourself.” This first principle is both independent of a science of grammar as such, and derivable from the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (the science of all sciences in which all first principles are derived), “I=I.” Is this the project Humboldt attempts in (for example and especially) his introduction to the study of the Kawi language?

About that work Humboldt wrote:

> My aim is ... a study that treats the faculty of speech in its inward aspect, as a human faculty, and which uses its effects as sources of knowledge and examples in developing the argument. I wish to show that what makes any particular language what it is, is its grammatical structure and to explain how the grammatical structure in all its diversities still can only follow certain methods that will be listed one by one, so that, by the study of each language, it can be shown which methods are dominant or mixed in it. Now, in these methods

> themselves I consider of course the influence of each on the mind and feeling, and their explanation in terms of the causes of the origins of language, in so far as this is possible. Thus I connect the study of language with the philosophical survey of humanity's capacity for formation [*Bildung*] and with history.[60]

Now the very fact that Humboldt turns to an empirical analysis of a natural language should lead us to suspect the differences between his conception of a science of language and Fichte's conception are dramatically different. Indeed recall that we pointed out that one debate at stake in the question of the *Ursprache* is the appropriate discipline for the study of the nature of language. If one were a conventionalist, one would turn to actual historical stages of the consensual establishment of meaning; if one were an innatist, one would turn to philosophical investigations of human nature; and if one were a divine providentialist one would turn to theology. In fact, neither Fichte nor Humboldt falls squarely into these categories. On the one hand, both combine innatism and conventionalism and it is this combination that leads Surber to suggest the connections he does. Clearly the combination of innatism and conventionalism allowed Fichte and Humboldt "to explore connections among observed features of existing languages, their underlying structural and grammatical similarities and derivations, and the philosophical assumptions upon which these inquiries rested."[61] On the other hand, Fichte is an innatist in that he believes that language springs from human nature, but a conventionalist in that he believes that language was (and had to be) invented. Humboldt is a conventionalist in that he thinks language was invented, but an innatist in thinking that this invention had to occur according to certain, telelogically driven formal structures (*innere Sprachformen*). It is these teleologically driven formal structures that Humboldt refers to when he claims "the grammatical structure in all its diversities still can only follow certain methods." These grammatical structures, in turn, operate to structure the contents of consciousness; thus Humboldt's famous proto-Wittgensteinian claim: "The differences between languages are not those of sounds and signs but of differing world views."[62] As a language can never be properly understood as an object but only as an activity—as medium of thought rather than a tool for encoding thought—it

is not possible to analyze language abstracted from the actual, historical practices of expressions. The foundation for a science of language must be empirical, not transcendental, and this follows directly from his theory of language. It is fair to conclude, then, that the philosophical differences between Fichte's theory of language and Humboldt's theory of language are so extensive as to rule out the likelihood of influence.

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[1] Humanities Press, 1995. Hereafter "Surber."
[2] Surber, 112.
[3] Quoted in Paul Sweet's "Wilhelm von Humboldt, Fichte, and the Idéologues (1794–1805): A Re–Examination" (*Historiographia Linguistica* XV:3 349–375), 350. Hereafter "Sweet."
[4] Sweet, Paul. *Wilhelm von Humboldt, A Biography*. 2 Vols. (Columbus: The Ohio State Press, 1978–80), 154.
[5] Fichte's *Werke*, Vol. VII. (ed. I. H. Fichte, Berlin: Gruyter, 1971), 301–41. It is this piece that Surber translates (included as an appendix) and analyzes in his recent work. I will refer to it from now on as "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language" and will give the pagination in Surber's book. All translations are Surber's unless otherwise noted.
[6] Quoted in Sweet, 351.
[7] Translated by Nathan Rotenstreich in "Humboldt's Prolegomena to Philosophy of Language,"*Cultural Hermeneutics* 2 (1974), 211–27. I will refer to it by the translation of its German title, "On Thinking and Speaking." All page references refer to Rotenstreich's article. For the record, Rotenstreich mentions Kant, Locke and Herder as influencing Humboldt. All translations are Rotenstreich's unless otherwise noted.
[8] Hans Aarsleff. *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 348. Hereafter "Aarsleff."
[9] In "Wem gehört Humboldt? Zum Einfluss der französischen Aufklärung auf die Sprachphilosophie der deutschen Romantik." *Logos Semantikos: Studia Linguistica in honorom Eugenio Coseriu* Vol. 1, ed. Horst Geckeler (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1981), 117–35.
[10] Aarsleff, 340.
[11] Implicit in this suggestion is that the essay itself does not reveal its influences. The problem is that "Über Sprechen und Denken" is actually only sixteen statements on language that form three interrelated arguments. The paucity of explication lends itself to a wide variety of interpretations.
[12] Quoted in Martin L. Manchester's *The Philosophical Foundations of Humboldt's Linguistic Doctrines* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1985), 26.
[13] "Language and Communication," in A. George, ed. *Reflections on Chomsky* (Oxford: Blackwell,1989), 192 .
[14] J. P. Süssmilch. *Versuch ein Beweises, dass die erste Sprach ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* (Berlin: Realbuchhandlung, 1766).
[15] *On the Origin of Language*. tr. J. H. Moran and A. Gode (New York: Unger, 1966).
[16] Surber, 6.
[17] Surber, 108.
[18] Surber, 108.
[19] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 203.
[20] Fichte also grants some of the view of the divine providentialists. In his lecture notes on language (in *J. G. Fichte–Gesamtausgabe II, 4* translated into English as "Fichte's Lecture Notes on Planter's '*Aphorisms*'", in Surber, 265–308) Fichte says that since reason develops only in response to a summons by another rational being, the origin of reason in man must belong to a rational being outside of man. "A being which since prior to this no man is supposed to have

existed, can itself not be man;—but something different:—a higher being. It might be proved that this higher being was God" (Surber, 272).
[21] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 204.
[22] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 206.
[23] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 204. Italics his.
[24] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 205.
[25] Notice that the linguistic capacity presupposes an already established intersubjective relation. For linguistic expression to serve to indicate one's thoughts to another person, there must already be in place a system of signs that both parties recognize as signifying specific thoughts. To avoid the conclusion that language must precede the possibility of its use, Fichte will argue that the earliest forms of language were ideographic. People signified things to others through the use of drawings of the objects. He actually argues that the *Ursprache* was hieroglyphics, no doubt thinking of Egyptian hieroglyphics and thinking they were ideographic rather than phonographic. The Rosetta Stone, which revealed Egyptian hieroglyphics to be phonographic, was not discovered until 1799, four years after his essay on language appeared.
[26] "In order to voluntarily decide to invent a language an idea of it would have to be presupposed. Hence the question: how did the idea to reciprocally share their thoughts through signs arise in human beings?" ("On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 121).
[27] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 121. For example, humans shape nature to their ends by digging caves, clothing themselves with leaves, and domesticating animals (or fleeing them if they cannot).
[28] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 122.
[29] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 122.
[30] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 121.
[31] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 122.
[32] Fichte then addresses the obvious problem of how one immediately—in fact preconsciously—recognizes other persons as rational beings.
[33] "It is precisely this drive that would have to produce in him the wish to indicate his thoughts to the other to whom he has become connected, and, on the other hand, to be able to obtain from the other a clear communication of the other's thoughts. . . . Through associations with human beings, there awakens in us the idea of indicating our thoughts to one another through arbitrary signs—in a word: *the idea of language*. Accordingly, in the drive grounded in the nature of man to discover rationality outside of himself there lies the particular *drive to realize language*, and the necessity to satisfy it enters when rational beings enter into reciprocity with one another" ("On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 123f.).
[34] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," 124, fn. 1.
[35] "On Thinking and Speaking," 211.
[36] "On Thinking and Speaking," 211.
[37] "On Thinking and Speaking," 211.
[38] "On Thinking and Speaking," 211.
[39] Rotenstreich translates it as "sensuality;" often others translate it as "sensuousness."
[40] "On Thinking and Speaking," 211.
[41] "On Thinking and Speaking," 211.
[42] *Anstoss* is an extremely important word in Fichte's theory of subjectivity. For an analysis of its meaning and importance see Danial Breazeale's "Check or Checkmate? On the Finitude of the Fichtean Self" in Karl Ameriks's and Dieter Sturma's *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995).
[43] "On Thinking and Speaking," 212.
[44] *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, 24. The quotation continues: "Concepts are generated when they are torn loose from the moving fabric of representations and form themselves into objects, in opposition to a subject. But their objectivity seems more complete when this division does not occur in the subject alone, but when the representor really sees the thought outside himself,

which is possible only in another being that, like himself, represents and thinks. But between one thinking power and another there is no mediator other than language."

[45] *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language–Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (translated by Peter Heath, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 280. Hereafter *On Language*. This is a translation of Humboldt's extensive introduction to his book on the Kawi language (*Gesammelte Schriften,* Vol. VII, 1–345).

[46] In addition, the priority on the vocal sounds becomes the key for his account of linguistic relativity; the ground for the variations in "world–views" across linguistic divides lies in the different sounds of the different languages.

[47] 140f. Italics his.

[48] 306, "Über die Verwandtschaft der Ortsadverben mit dem Pronomen in einigen Sprachen" in von Humboldt's *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. VI. ed. Albert Leitzman (Berlin: Behr's Verlag, 1907), 304–30. Hereafter "On the Relationship of the Locative Adverbs." Page numbers refer to this volume; all translations are the author's.

[49] "On the Relationship of the Locative Adverbs," 306

[50] The important quotation is the following: "As long as one only parses thinking logically and does not parse language grammatically, one does not need the second person at all, and moreover the first person plays a different role. Since our common grammars tend to proceed from the logical in their analysis of speech, they deal with the pronoun differently than that approach which attempts an analysis of language itself. Here [in the analysis of language itself] the pronoun precedes everything else and is seen as standing alone; there [in the logical analysis of speech–grammar] the pronoun only follows the completed exposition of the main parts of speech and takes on essentially (as its name also implies) a representative character" ("On the Relationship of the Locative Adverbs," 305).

[51] "On the Relationship of the Locative Adverbs," 306.

[52] As the title of the essay suggests, Humboldt goes even further claiming that personal pronouns originates as locative adverbs. This appeases Humboldt's Kantian sensibilities ("One sees here at the same time yet another proof of how the pure forms of intuition, 'space' and 'time', are particularly well suited to adequately mediate the transformation,—which we meet so often—, from abstract concepts, which are so difficult, into concrete [concepts]" (329)) as well as his sentiments about the primacy of dialogue for the analysis of language ("It is clear that in this case language has again made use of the fundamental–archetype [*Urtypus*] derived from the nature of dialogue" (312). Of course there is some question as to which comes first, the locative adverbs or the personal pronouns, but, "an analysis of the Armenian pronouns and verbs ... gives us adequate reason to assume that it is not those person–signs chosen according to other relations which are used as place terms, but *vice versa*" (312).

[53] In *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) pp. 185–215. Hereafter "Concerning the Difference."

[54] "Concerning the Difference," 196.

[55] "Concerning the Difference," 196. By "body" Fichte merely means physical representations of ideas (not literally, the body). He uses it interchangeably with the term "letter" as it is used in the title.

[56] *Gesammelte Schriften Vol. III*, 169.

[57] Surber, 112.

[5858] "Concerning the General Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*" in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, 101. For a detailed presentation of Fichte's science of language see Jere Surber's "J. G. Fichte and The 'Scientific' Reconstruction of Grammar" in Tom Rockmore's and Danial Breazeale's *New Perspectives on Fichte* (Atlantic Highlands, N. J. : Humanities Press, 1996) pp. 60–77. It is here that Surber first speculates that "Fichte may have played a more important role in the origins of scientific linguistics with Wilhelm von Humboldt than has heretofore been recognized" (65).

[59] "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language", 119.

[60] Hans Aarsleff, "Introduction" to Wilhelm von Humboldt's *On Language*, p. xiv.

[61] Surber, 108.
[62] *Gesammtle Schriften Vol. III*, 169.