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WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT AND DIALOGICAL THINKING

JOHN WALKER

ABSTRACT

The dialogical principle is central not just to Humboldt's theory of language but also to his philosophical anthropology, and it has a direct political relevance. Dialogue is intrinsic to the realization of human subjectivity in a diverse community of free individuals. Language involves two constitutive principles: the inner linguistic sense ('innerer Sprachsinn') and objective sound ('der Laut'): individual self-expression has meaning only when it is reflected back in the voice of another. The diversity ('Verschiedenheit') of languages and their comparative study is not just essential to our understanding of our own languages as well as those of others; it is intrinsic to the nature of language as such. Translation is thus a privileged route to cultural as well as linguistic communication.

Keywords: Dialogue; language; subjectivity; community; diversity; *Verschiedenheit*; inner linguistic sense; objective sound; translation; culture; communication

A VAST ARRAY OF THINKERS since classical antiquity have seen dialogue as intrinsic to the pursuit of truth, and used the dialogic form as the philosophical or literary mode most appropriate to the articulation of their thought. From Plato to David Hume and modern thinkers like Derrida and Žižek, philosophers have used dialogue as a vehicle of dialectic, in which truth is supposed to emerge from the clash and mutual interaction of intellectual perspectives. The German Romantics, concerned especially with the difficulty and therefore the irony involved in the articulation of the inner self, turned to dialogue as an instrument of both literary and philosophical communication. Nineteenth-century social and psychological critics of religion like Ludwig Feuerbach and his literary disciple George Eliot saw in dialogue – the connection of I to Thou and the realization of both in community – the real social presence of the truth which religion had once expressed in theological form. In the twentieth century the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber – himself indebted to Humboldt¹ – sees in the 'I-Thou' relation the key to understanding both man's relationship to God and the social ethic which that relationship engenders. The literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin proposed with his concept of the 'dialogic' (*heteroglossia*) a radically new way of reading literary texts, whilst the contemporary concern with globalization and the cultural hybridity that process has produced makes intercultural dialogue an urgent political necessity. What, then, is special about Humboldt's idea of the dialogical character of truth? What most distinguishes Humboldt's approach to dialogue is, firstly, his idea of the original (in both senses) character of dialogue in relation to both language and thought and, secondly, the

centrality of that idea to his entire political and cultural vision of the realization of human freedom.

For Humboldt, dialogue is primary to language in two senses. First, language does not ‘employ’ dialogue; it is itself intrinsically dialogical. In particular, our sense of selfhood is inseparable from our ability to address a ‘Thou’. Human self-consciousness and therefore our consciousness of an encompassing human world are irreducibly both linguistic and dialogical. Secondly, language as dialogue cannot be conceived as having a natural or supernatural origin apart from the emergence of humanity itself. Language – dialogue – is coextensive with the sphere of the human. For Humboldt, the original dialogical character of language is related to both the way we learn languages and the way languages develop among a plurality (*Verschiedenheit*) of different tongues. The development of a speaker to linguistic maturity and the evolution of a linguistic community towards an ever more adequate means of human expression necessarily imply an engagement with *difference*. For Humboldt, this is the model and paradigm of humanity itself. The most important theme in Humboldt’s political philosophy is the realization of individual freedom in a community of free persons. In his essay on the necessary limitation of the power of the state (*Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen*, 1797), he argues that the object of the political state is to *enable* the realization of human freedom, but neither to initiate nor to preclude its expression. That realization can come about only by the encounter of freedom with difference, which takes place as we learn language and, with a similar dynamic, as we learn to live together in a human community.² It implies *Freiheit*, the creative freedom with which each person apprehends both language and humanity, *Mannigfaltigkeit*, the manifold variety of linguistic and human environments they encounter, and *Eigentümlichkeit*, the mature human personality, with its own unique mode of participation in a common world of human meaning, which is the upshot of that encounter.³

Humboldt’s clearest and most fundamental expression of the dialogical principle comes in his essay on dualism in language *Über den Dualis* (‘On the Dual’) published in 1827. Our very idea of an independent self – what Martin Buber was later to call ‘die Ablösung des Ich’ [the detachment of the I]⁴ – is inconceivable without our capacity to address another, which is also the source of our ability to conceive of a world⁵ of concepts and not only of perceptions:

Es liegt aber in dem ursprünglichen Wesen der Sprache ein unabänderlicher Dualismus [...]; schon das Denken ist wesentlich von einer Neigung zum gesellschaftlichen Daseyn begleitet,

und der Mensch sehnt sich, abgesehen von allen körperlichen und Empfindungsbeziehungen, auch zum Behuf seines blossen Denkens nach einem dem Ich entsprechenden Du, der Begriff scheint ihm erst seine Bestimmtheit und Gewissheit durch das Zurückstrahlen einer fremden Denkkraft zu erreichen. (GS VI: 26)

[At the very root of language lies an irreversible dualism [...]; thought itself is always accompanied by a tendency towards social existence. Quite apart from his or her physical or emotional relationships, the human person strives for the sake of thinking itself towards a ‘Thou’ which corresponds to the ‘I’. Concepts become precise and certain for us only when they are reflected back to us through the thinking of another person.]⁶

Humboldt's emphasis on the social and dialogical character of language is a direct consequence of his understanding that words are not discrete ‘signs’ representing objects external to themselves:

Es bleibt zwischen dem Wort und seinem Gegenstande eine so befremdende Kluft, das Wort gleicht, allein im Einzelnen geboren, so sehr einem blossen Scheinobject, die Sprache kann auch nicht vom Einzelnen, sie kann nur gesellschaftlich, nur indem an einen gewagten Versuch ein neuer sich anknüpft, zur Wirklichkeit gebracht werden. Das Wort muß also Wesenheit, die Sprache Erweiterung in einem Fremden und Erwiedernden gewinnen. (GS VI: 26)

[There is always such an alienating rift between the word and object, the word, as it is born in the consciousness of a single individual, seems to be such an illusory object, that language cannot be realized by any one individual, but only in society; that is when one person’s tentative attempt at linguistic expression is matched by the response of another. The essence of the word is realized, and language can develop, only through one who hears and replies.]

Humboldt's perception that what we call the world of human experience is constructed by, even if it cannot be reduced to, the multiple systems of human language does not lead him to the conclusion that communication between languages is impossible or that the idea of a universal human truth is incoherent. Quite the reverse: the primacy of language to thought and its intrinsically dialogical character are the source of the objective connection between language and truth.

As Humboldt writes in his essay *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* ['The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind', 1830], all actual language has two 'constitutive principles' ('constitutive Principe') (GS VII: 251). They are the inner linguistic sense ('innerer Sprachsinn'), which Humboldt identifies with our whole intellectual faculty of forming and using language ('das ganze geistige Vermögen, bezogen auf die Bildung und den Gebrauch der Sprache'), and the objective form of language in the spoken sound ('Der Laut'). The relationship between the two principles is dialectical, because the speaker only understands what she is saying when she hears her own speech reflected back to her in the words of an interlocutor. Dialogue, in other words, is essential not just to the establishment of an objective world of human discourse, but to the apprehension of human subjectivity itself (GS VII: 55–56).

This is the source of what Jürgen Trabant has called 'the constitutive strangeness of language' ('die konstitutive Fremdheit der Sprache').⁷ Humboldt differs from deconstructionists like Derrida in seeing linguistic alienation as already present in speech.⁸ In speech (as in all linguistic usage) we experience not only the utterances of others but also our own as 'strange', because they are reflected in the objective world of human discourse. We can never, at any given moment, reduce that world to a discrete object of the mind, but only participate in and so creatively extend it. We can speak 'about' that world only as, and because, we speak in and of it. To be sure, in language we encounter the humanity ('die Menschheit') of which we are always a part. However, our humanity will necessarily appear to us as strange, because what we have ourselves created is reflected back to us as something other than ourselves. Humboldt's insight, which is about humanity as much as about language, is that this strangeness is ultimately benign, because it is a necessary moment in the process of our becoming persons and so changing our environment into a human world.⁹ Our participation in language, for Humboldt, is about the self-alienation of humanity and its overcoming. To be human is to live in language. To live in language is to encounter a world which is strange to ourselves, in a way which is different in degree, but not in kind, when we encounter other languages as well as our own. For this reason, Humboldt writes, all understanding is also a form of non-understanding (GS VII: 64).

Language is by the same token both individual and social. The social character of language does not suppress or distort its capacity for individual expression, but rather makes it possible:

Erst im Individuum erhält die Sprache ihre letzte Bestimmtheit. Keiner denkt bei dem Wort gerade und genau das, was der andre, und die noch so kleine Verschiedenheit zittert, wie ein Kreis im Wasser, durch die ganze Sprache fort. (GS VII: 64)

[Only in the individual does language receive its ultimate determinacy. Nobody means by a word precisely and exactly what his neighbour does, and the difference, be it ever so small, vibrates, like a ripple in water, throughout the entire language.]¹⁰

Humboldt writes in his essay *Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung* ['On the Comparative Study of Language in Relation to the Different Stages of Language Development', 1820] that the phenomenon of language implies not only a plurality of speakers but also a plurality of worlds of speech which are also worlds of thought:

Das Denken ist aber nicht bloss abhängig von der Sprache überhaupt, sondern, bis auf einen gewissen Grad, auch von jeder einzelnen bestimmten. (GS IV: 21)

[Thought is not only dependent on language as such but also, to a certain degree, on each particular language.]

However, most central to Humboldt's argument is not the relativity of thought to language and therefore the contingent plurality of linguistic and intellectual perspectives, but the universal human need for diversity which that plurality implies. In his essay *Einleitung in das gesamme Sprachstudium* ['Introduction to the Whole Study of Language', 1810/11], Humboldt writes as follows:

Vermutlich ist der eigentliche Grund der Vielheit der Sprachen das innere Bedürfnis des menschlichen Geistes, eine Mannigfaltigkeit intellectueller Formen hervorzubringen, welche Schranke auf uns gleich unbekannte Weise, als die Mannigfaltigkeit der belebten Naturbildungen, findet. (GS VII/2: 622)

[The real reason for the multiplicity of languages is probably the inner need of the human mind to bring forth a multiplicity of intellectual forms. The limit to that diversity is as incomprehensible to us as the limit to the formation of organisms in the natural world.]

Just as the individual speaker can realize her own linguistic and intellectual personality only through the act of dialogue, languages themselves can develop only through linguistic encounter (GS VII: 19). For this reason the diversity (*Verschiedenheit*) of languages, which is inescapably connected to the diversity of modes of human thought, is not *only* a contingent fact, nor a hindrance to universal communication. On the contrary, it is the condition of the possibility of such communication and the purpose of the reflective study of language. For Humboldt, the study of language must necessarily be comparative, because the encounter between languages is the key to linguistic development. However, just as our quest for interpersonal understanding within a given linguistic community can never be definitively realized, so we can approach the comparative study of language only as a regulative ideal. Thus Humboldt writes in his essay *Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium* of 1820 as follows:

Hierin ist der Grund, und der letzte Zweck aller Sprachuntersuchung enthalten. Die Summe des Erkennbaren liegt, als das von dem menschlichen Geiste zu bearbeitende Feld, zwischen allen Sprachen, und unabhängig von ihnen, in der Mitte; der Mensch kann sich diesem rein objectiven Gebiet nicht anders, als nach seiner Erkennungs- und Empfindungsweise, also auf einem subjectiven Wege, nähern. (GS IV: 27)

[This is the ground and the ultimate purpose of all our investigation of language. The totality of what can be known, as our field of intellectual enquiry, lies between all languages, and independent of any particular language, *in the middle*. We can only approach this purely objective domain by means of our faculty of knowledge and imagination; that is to say, subjectively.]

In language, especially the encounter between languages, the relationship between the transcendental freedom and the actual embodiment of humanity becomes manifest, but remains always partially impenetrable to the reflective mind. Our study of language necessarily involves the subjective imagination because the object of our concern is the subjectivity of humanity itself, which is expressed by, but can never be reduced to, the means of its linguistic expression (GS IV: 27).

For the same reason, translation is essential to Humboldt's idea of the comparative study of language. For Humboldt, the object of translation is to overcome not what is 'other'

(‘das Fremde’) in the target language and text but rather what is ‘alien’ (‘die Fremdheit’) in it.¹¹ In a famous introduction to a translation of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, he writes as follows:

Solange nicht die Fremdheit, sondern das Fremde gefühlt wird, hat die Übersetzung ihre höchsten Zwecke erreicht; wo aber die Fremdheit an sich erscheint, und vielleicht das Fremde verdunkelt, da verräth der Übersetzer, daß er seinem Original nicht gewachsen ist. (GS VIII: 132)

[As long as what we feel on reading a translation is not the alien quality (‘die Fremdheit’), but what is other (‘das Fremde’) about the original, translation has fulfilled its true purpose. However, if only the alien is apparent and what is other is obscured, it is clear that the translation is not adequate to the original.]

The object of translation is not to overcome, but to disclose the meaning of linguistic difference. Its purpose is not simply to understand foreign languages and literatures, but chiefly to extend our knowledge of our own (GS VIII: 130).

Our encounter with the strangeness of a foreign language is therefore a privileged route to understanding the strangeness – the necessarily objective and contingently alien character – of all language, including especially our own. Such understanding, for Humboldt, is never to be confused with exhaustive or reductive explanation. For Humboldt, the phenomenon of language implies a kind of mysterious creativity which belongs to the immediate embodiment of the inner linguistic sense, unique to each individual and yet connected to one or more communities of speech, in the external medium of sound:

Die unzertrennliche Verbindung des Gedankens, des Stimmwerkzeugs und des Gehörs zur Sprache liegt unabänderlich in der ursprünglichen, nicht weiter zu erklärenden Einrichtung der menschlichen Natur. (GS VII: 53)

The inseparable bonding of *thought*, *vocal apparatus*, and *hearing* to language is unalterably rooted in the original constitution of human nature, which cannot be further explained. (PH 55)

This irreducible element of creative spontaneity in language is of general human relevance. It points to the creative freedom inherent in all human moral and imaginative life: a freedom which is real precisely because it can never be abstracted from the objective means of its

expression. Language points to the truth, crucial to Humboldt's moral and political as well as his linguistic philosophy, that it is only through our experience of the constraint (*Einengung*) of membership in particular human communities, indeed their distinctive difference (*Ausschliessung*) one from another, that mature personality (*Eigentümlichkeit*) can emerge (GS VII: 24–25).

The purpose of learning new languages is therefore not just more adequately to understand other languages or one's own, but to approach (though never definitively to achieve) the understanding of human creativity itself:

Die Erlernung einer fremden Sprache sollte daher die Gewinnung eines neuen Standpunkts in der bisherigen Weltansicht seyn und ist es in der That bis auf einen gewissen Grad, da jede Sprache das ganze Gewebe der Begriffe und die Vorstellungsweise eines Theils der Menschheit enthält. Nur weil man in eine fremde Sprache immer, mehr oder weniger, seine eigne Welt, ja seine eigne Sprachansicht hinüberträgt, so wird dieser Erfolg nicht rein und vollständig empfunden. (GS VII: 60)

[To learn a *foreign language* should therefore be to acquire a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed, and in fact to a certain extent is so, since every language contains the whole conceptual fabric and mode of presentation of a portion of mankind. But because we always carry over, more or less, our own worldview, and even our own language-view, this outcome is not purely and completely experienced. (PH 60)]

This sense of the irreducible creativity of language leads Humboldt to describe language not just as a form of human activity ('*Thätigkeit*'), but as an inexplicable form of spontaneous activity ('*unerklärliche Selbstthätigkeit*') rather than a product of activity ('*Erzeugnis der Thätigkeit*'). This inexplicable spontaneous power arouses in Humboldt 'reverential awe' ('*ehrfurchtsvolle Scheu*') (GS VII: 17) because it manifests the freedom of the individual to articulate a unique identity which is always related to, but never reducible to, his or her participation in the dialogue of humankind:

Wie sich dies hier abbrechende Daseyn der Einzelnen mit der fortgehenden Entwicklung des Geschlechts vielleicht in einer uns unbekannten Region vereinigt, bleibt ein undurchdringliches Geheimniss. (GS VII/1: 33)

[How this broken-off existence here of the individual is united with the advancing development of the species, into a region perhaps unknown to us, remains an impenetrable mystery. (PH 38)]

However, this sense of reverence, which Humboldt says is also a necessary moment in the education of every person ('ein wichtiges Moment in der inneren individuellen Ausbildung') is occasioned also by the irreducible plurality of nations and cultures. No particular culture can ever become fully self-conscious about the creative power manifest in its particular language. Yet the creative interaction of languages and cultures, which can never be wholly intelligible at any particular moment of historical time, embodies the cultural development – in Humboldt's terms, the progress (*Fortschreiten*) – of humankind (GS VII: 17). Humboldt's sense of awe is awakened by the consequences of Babel: the transcendental purpose of the diversity of human discourse which is the meaning of difference itself. Language here is the paradigm for culture, because the intellectual concentration which the learning of a particular language requires also generates consciousness of linguistic exclusivity and thus the need for knowledge of a multiplicity of languages to enable universal human discourse. This process of learning, like the capacity for mature self-expression to which it gives rise, is necessarily unique in every particular individual. *Bildung* (the self-education of each individual person) is the key to understanding *Kultur* ('culture' as it is embodied in the life of human communities); not the other way round. Linguistic and cultural difference, because it is the living form and not the ossified product of human self-expression (*Selbstthätigkeit*), can never be reduced to the object of either empirical analysis or theoretical reflection. It enjoins, in its academic study as much as its immediate expression, an attitude of epistemic respect which requires imaginative empathy.

For this reason, Humboldt argues in his early essay on the historiography of the eighteenth century *Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert* ['The Eighteenth Century', 1796–97] that the creative writer (*der Dichter*) will often have more understanding of human character in society than the philosophical moralist (*der Moralist*) (GS II: 74). The true character of a language can be shown only by its actual use in human interaction, and this we often understand through the literary imagination, especially that of the dramatist who can relate dialogue convincingly to action. Only by imagining the use of language in dialogue can we understand the connection between its ideal form and its actual expression: a connection which is real and actual precisely because it *cannot* be definitively codified. Our ordinary use of language (*der Sprachgebrauch*) bridges the gap by what Humboldt calls informed and

practised feeling ('das geübte Gefühl', GS II: 73). It is just such a practical imagination which must also inform our reflective and philosophical study of language.¹² The role of what Kant called the productive imagination ('produktive Einbildungskraft')¹³ in the study of language reflects, therefore, a fundamental truth about language itself.

In his essay of 1820 on the comparative study of language, Humboldt argues that all language except that of material fact ('die Ausdrücke für sinnliche Gegenstände', GS IV: 29 et seq.) or of the theoretical sciences ('die Wissenschaften der reinen Gedankenkonstruktion') necessarily involves the whole power of subjective individuality ('die ganze Kraft der subjectiven Individualität') which encounters the subjectivity of others in dialogue. Linguistic usage can broadly be divided into two categories: the scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) and the rhetorical (*rednerisch*, GS IV: 30 et seq.). The rhetorical use, which constantly employs language as a vehicle of the subjective imagination, has the most influence on the character of language as a whole, because only the artificial language of science can eliminate all subjectivity from linguistic expression to the point of creating a language of objective signs (*Zeichen*). At the same time, the scientific must also be distinguished from the conventional use of language ('der conventionelle Gebrauch der Sprache') and the language of practical affairs ('der Geschäftsgebrauch'). For the practical and conventional use of language, because it is not artificially separated from common life and the free receptivity of language to the process of experience ('die Freiheit der Empfänglichkeit') which that implies, is always affected by the creative and imaginative character of language as well. It is precisely through this freedom of receptivity, Humboldt argues, that language develops and the language of a people becomes also the language of a national literature (the two, for Humboldt, can never ultimately be separated).

This is the reason for Humboldt's emphasis on *parole* (actual linguistic usage) above *langue* (the formal system of linguistic rules) in the Saussurean sense.¹⁴ For Humboldt, language is not Cartesian in Chomsky's sense, because it does not bring to expression innate ideas, whether prompted or not by external stimuli.¹⁵ Neither is language the product of a universal grammar which can be considered present in all human minds prior to its actual expression.¹⁶ To be sure, what Humboldt calls the inner linguistic sense ('der innere Sprachsinn') is not determined by environment. However, this sense can be real only in conjunction with the form of sound which is its actual expression: a conjunction which is different in all languages and through which language constantly evolves. It follows that the capacity of language to make infinite use of finite means, which is central to Humboldt's as well as Chomsky's account of language, cannot be understood in Chomsky's terms as a set of

finite but universal rules, innate to the mind, which enable the speaker to produce an infinite variety of sentences.¹⁷ For Humboldt, that infinite capacity develops only through actual linguistic practice and the encounter of speakers and languages which that practice entails. *Langue*, for Humboldt, is inseparable from *parole*. As Roman Jakobson writes, ‘for Humboldt, all language is both product and creation, static and dynamic [...]. All *langue* as well as *parole* is [...] solidarity with the past, temporal conformity, and infidelity to the past, non-conformity.’¹⁸

The irreducible conjunction in human language of individual creativity with objective order, which provokes Humboldt’s intellectual reverence, means that despite and indeed because of the dialogical character of language, it is always individual people, not national or cultural communities, who speak; and it is to individual speakers that we must always listen:

Indem die Sprachen nun also in dem von allem Missverständniss befreiten Sinn des Worts Selbstschöpfungen der Nationen sind, bleiben sie doch Selbstschöpfungen der Individuen, indem sie sich nur in jedem Einzelnen, in ihm aber nur so erzeugen können, dass jeder das Verständnis aller voraussetzt und alle dieser Erwartung genügen. (GS VII: 40)

[So although languages are thus the work of *nations*, in a sense of the term liberated from all misunderstanding, they still remain the self-creations of *individuals*, in that they can be produced solely in each individual, but only in such a fashion that each presupposes the understanding of all, and all fulfil this expectation. (PH 44)]

In the same vein, Humboldt remarks that we can equally well speak of a universal language of mankind as of a unique presence of language in each and every person:

Denn so wundervoll ist in der Sprache die Individualisirung innerhalb der allgemeinen Übereinstimmung, dass man ebenso richtig sagen kann, dass das ganze Menschengeschlecht nur eine Sprache, als dass jeder Mensch eine besondere besitzt. (GS VII: 51)

[For in language the *individualization* within a *general conformity* is so wonderful, that we may say with equal correctness that the whole of mankind has but one language, and that every person has one of their own. (PH 43)]

The universal phenomenon of language discloses the meaning of human difference without eliding or reducing its reality; and the task of the philosophical linguist is to explain how and

why this is so. In this sense Humboldt's understanding of linguistic difference is very different from that of Heidegger, for whom understanding the objectivity of language requires a *renunciation* of subjectivity.¹⁹

For this reason, Humboldt's linguistic thought is central to his ethical and political philosophy of human freedom. As Donatella Di Cesare has shown, Humboldt's idea of dialogue is the model for a political community of free individuals which is organically whole and not mechanistically organized.²⁰ However, Humboldt's linguistic and political vision can be reduced neither to an abstract universalism nor to an ideologically constructed idea of *Gemeinschaft* as a linguistically determined form of community. Humboldt differs from the majority of German idealist and romantic thinkers in insisting that the state itself is *not* a human community, but only the necessary means, to be limited as far as possible, of enabling such a community to exist.²¹ The idea of an antithesis between the atomized individualism of modern society (*Gesellschaft*) and the immediate or organic community (*Gemeinschaft*), classically formulated by Ferdinand Tönnies in 1888²² but disabling to generations of German political thinkers,²³ is entirely foreign to Humboldt. This conceptual opposition is irrelevant to Humboldt because, in linguistic communication as in social and political interaction, dialogue implies a real acknowledgement of the other, and a real understanding of the unique and independent existence of the subject. What Jürgen Trabant calls the constitutive strangeness of the linguistic medium reflects the fact that, in the very medium of human communication, we encounter the reality of human difference: a 'Thou' which is not the projection of ourselves, but truly another person.²⁴

This – what might be called the creative alienation implicit in language – is for Humboldt the key analogy between the study of language and the study of culture. It is the source of a major paradox in Humboldt's account of language. The science (*Wissenschaft*) of language requires that language should be studied as an objective system. But language can never be studied *only* as an objective system, because our participative subjectivity, as students no less than speakers of language, is always involved in the object of our study. For this reason Humboldt insists on speaking, not of the science (*Wissenschaft*) but of the study (*Studium*) of language (GS VII/2: 620–21). For Humboldt, it is this which makes the study of language not just a particular humanistic discipline but the epistemic paradigm of both the difficulty and the promise of all specifically human knowledge.

Humboldt's idea of dialogue is especially relevant to the problem of intercultural communication in an age of global civilization. It celebrates more than it reacts against the consequences of Babel and so contributes to what Jonathan Sacks has called 'exorcising

Plato's ghost'.²⁵ Humboldt's dialogical principle steers a middle course between the Scylla and Charybdis of universalism and relativism, because it both affirms the idea of universal humanity and eschews any idea of a universal consensus which might be realized in abstraction from the resources of linguistic and therefore cultural tradition.

For Humboldt, dialogue is not the watchword of a culturally freighted and therefore outdated European humanism. It is the very opposite. It does justice to both the cultural hybridity of the modern world and what Martin Buber called the greatness (*Größe*) and the melancholy (*Schwermut*) of the human condition. That ambivalence derives from our inextricable involvement, because of our capacity for dialogue, in the world of culture. That world, because it is human, we can never possess as if it were a thing; yet we must constantly strive to make it our own. As Buber writes:

Alle Antwort bindet das Du in die Eswelt ein. Das ist die Schwermut des Menschen, und das ist seine Größe. Denn so wird Erkenntnis, so wird Werk, so wird Bild und Vorbild in der Mitte der Lebendigen.²⁶

[Every act of response binds the ‘Thou’ into the world of ‘It’ (‘die Eswelt’). That is the melancholy but also the greatness of the human condition. For that is how knowledge, creative work, image and example are made manifest amongst living beings.]

That task is unending, because its ultimate object is the truth which is made manifest not in spite of or beyond difference, but in and because of it.

*Department of Cultures and Languages
Birkbeck, University of London
43 Gordon Square
London WC1H 0PD
United Kingdom
j.walker@bbk.ac.uk*

NOTES

¹ See Martin Buber, ‘Zwiesprache’, in *Das dialogische Prinzip* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1973), pp.137-187, at p.178.

² On the relationship between Humboldt's linguistic and political philosophy, see Hans-Ernst Schiller, ‘Bildung, Gesellschaft, Sprache: Der Individualismus der Selbstverwirklichung bei Wilhelm von

Humboldt', in *Das Individuum im Widerspruch. Zur Theoriegeschichte des modernen Individualismus* (Berlin: Frank und Timme, 2006), pp. 129–43.

³ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* ['An Attempt to Determine the Proper Limits of State Action', 1830], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 17 vols., ed. by Albert Leitzmann et al. (Berlin: Behr, 1903–36), hereafter quoted in the text as (GS volume: page); here (GS I: 107–08).

⁴ Buber, 'Ich und Du', in *Das dialogische Prinzip*, pp.7-136, at p. 66.

⁵ On Humboldt's concept of a linguistic world, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. by Garret Barden & John Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p.401.

⁶ If not otherwise stated, all translations are by me, JW.

⁷ Jürgen Trabant, *Was ist Sprache?* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2008), p. 58.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 66, 238; cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp.6-10.

⁹ Trabant, *Was ist Sprache?*, p. 60.

¹⁰ The English translation is by Peter Heath, *On Language. The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), hereafter in the text as PH followed by page number; here PH p. 63.

¹¹ On the relevance of Humboldt's theory of translation to the problem of intercultural communication, see Andrea Polaschegg, 'Wenn Dichotomien reden könnten: Das Eigene und das Fremde', in *Der andere Orientalismus: Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 39–49, especially p. 42.

¹² See Humboldt's remarks on the importance of the 'lively gaze' and sensitivity to dialogue necessary for investigating an unknown and apparently unique language in his letter to Schiller after Humboldt's return from the Basque country in June 1801. Humboldt, Letter to Schiller of 14 June 1801, in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Briefwechsel*, ed. by Albert Leitzmann (Berlin: Akademieausgabe, 1903), pp. 276–77. On this theme, see also Chad Wellman, *Becoming Human. Romantic Anthropology and the Embodiment of Freedom* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), pp. 264–73.

¹³ For Kant's definition of this term, see Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 86.

¹⁴ On Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Jonathan Culler (London: Fontana, 1974 [1915]).

¹⁵ Cf. Noam Chomsky, *Rules and Representations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp.99-100.

¹⁶ Chomsky, *Rules and Representations*, p. 69.

¹⁷ Cf. Noam Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin and Use* (New York: Praeger, 1986), p. 30.

¹⁸ Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. by Linda R. Waugh & Monique Monville-Benston (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 108.

¹⁹ See Heidegger, ‘Die Sprache’, in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1959), p. 12: ‘Der Sprache nachdenken verlangt somit, daß wir auf das Sprechen der Sprache eingehen, um bei der Sprache, d.h. in *ihrem* Sprechen, nicht in unserem, den Aufenthalt zu nehmen [...]. Der Sprache überlassen wir das Sprechen’ [To think after language requires that we go into the speaking of language in order to take up our position in language: that is, in *its* speaking, not in ours [...]. We must leave speaking to language].

²⁰ Donatella Di Cesare, ‘Die Sprache als Paradigma der kommenden Gesellschaft. Über Humboldt in der Zukunft’, in *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Universalität und Individualität*, ed. by Ute Tintemann & Jürgen Trabant (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), p. 166.

²¹ See Michael N. Forster on Wilhelm von Humboldt in Michael N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 83–108.

²² On the origins of this distinction, see Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*.

Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979 [1888]), pp. 3–4.

²³ See Helmut Plessner, ‘Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus’, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Günter Dux et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 42–57.

²⁴ Di Cesare, ‘Die Sprache als Paradigma’, p. 167: ‘Das Du ist also nicht die Kehrseite des Ichs, sondern wirklich etwas Anderes.’

²⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 45–55.

²⁶ Buber, ‘Ich und Du’, in *Das dialogische Prinzip*, pp. 7–136 at p. 41.

[JOHN WALKER
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