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# The Last Rhuthmologist of the 18th Century - Humboldt (1800-1835)



- Recherches

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Publication date: Wednesday 1 June 2016

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In Germany, along with Goethe whose work remains to be studied in detail Wilhelm von Humboldt was one of the very few important thinkers who maintained and developed the achievements of the previous *huthmology* during the first decades of the 19th century.

## Rhythm as Organization of the Activity of Language

In his introduction to Peter Heath's English translation of *On Language. The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (1836), Hans Aarsleff rightly emphasizes the importance of the aesthetic concerns in Humboldt's lifelong inquiry on language.

[For Humboldt] the fundamental nature of language was an aesthetic problem, accessible only to the artist. (Aarsleff, 1988, p. xvii)

Indeed, contrary to the approaches we have previously examined, his research resumed and extended in many aspects the poetic reflections initiated by his friends Schiller and Goethe, and his contemporaries Schlegel and Hölderlin.

Aarsleff also convincingly shows while maybe downplaying too much Leibniz's, Herder's and Hamann's influences Humboldt's debt to the 18th century French philosophers mainly Condillac and Diderot against a quite common but no less wrong assertion that the latter, as Cassirer claimed,

treated language exclusively as an instrument of cognition; found its origin in need and agreement for the single purpose of communication; saw the workings of ordinary language in terms of the ideal model of a perfect philosophical language; relied on a doctrine that made perception a passive and autonomous supplier of ready-made unproblematic ideas to which words merely needed to be added to produce a safe nomenclature for communication; left no room for diversities of languages except in the trivial outward forms of the sounds we call words; based their thought on the rationalist principles of universal grammars; and banished feeling, imagination, and creativity from all processes of language. All this items in this catalogue were well known when Cassirer wrote them up again, and every one of them is false. (Aarsleff, 1988, p. xxxiii-xxxiv)

As one may already know, Humboldt affirms that we must not think of language as made of separate elements, *signs*

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, or even of national *languages* that are only by-products, but as a perpetual human activity (*Thatigkeit*) by which human beings endeavor to think, express their feelings, give orders, thank each other, etc.

Language is the formative organ of *thought*. *Intellectual activity*, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes, through *sound*, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 54)

Aarsleff rightly underlines this point.

Language is not like a tool-box, but a creative power or in Humboldt's famous words, it is not *ergon* but *energeia* [...] This theory does not have room for the copy-theory of knowledge; language is not merely designative; it is not representation but expression. Language is constituent of thought and for that reason it must stand at the center of any viable epistemology. (Aarsleff, 1988, p. xix)

From this follow three other crucial philosophical assertions. As for Condillac and Diderot (Michon, 2015), *language and thought are inseparable*.

Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 54)

Aarsleff:

Humboldt's entire view of the nature of language is founded on the conviction that thinking and speaking, thought and language form so close a union that we must think of them as being identical, in spite of the fact that we can separate them artificially. Owing to this identity, access to one of the two will open nearly equal access to the other. All Humboldt's work on language is devoted to exploration of the possibilities that lie in this identity. (Aarsleff, 1988, p. xviii)

Therefore, philosophy cannot go on with its inquiry into human thinking without also inquiring carefully into the extraordinary *variety of human languages and literatures*.

The study of languages in all their diversity will provide both the best and the most plentiful kinds of evidence for understanding and knowledge of the processes of mind, which by their nature, whether pertaining to feeling or reason, remain hidden beyond hope of direct inspection. (Aarsleff, 1988, p. xviii)

This diversity mainly pertains to differences between the means used to "*articulate*" both *sounds and ideas*.

Two principles come to light: the *sound-form* and the *use* made of it to designate objects and connect thoughts. The latter is based on the requirements that *thinking* imposes on language, from which the *general laws* of language arise; and this part, in its original tendency, is therefore the same in all men [...] The sound-form, on the other hand, is the truly constitutive and guiding principle of the diversity of languages. [...] Now from these two principles, together with the inwardness of their mutual interpenetration, there proceeds the *individual form* of each language. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 54)

[The language] true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. For it is the ever-repeated *mental labor* of making the *articulated* sound capable of expressing *thought*. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 110)

With these four assertions, the primacy of activity, the intertwining flows of language and thought, the endless variety of forms of human expression and the central role of articulation, Humboldt decidedly inserts his theory in the neo-Heraclitean movement that has been developing in France and Germany in the second half of the 18th century and he brilliantly revives it. He is a plain *rhuthmologist*.

To this tradition clearly belongs Humboldt's very famous statement emphasizing the paradoxical nature of language, both "transitory" and "enduring", apparently being a "product" but actually an "activity." Language is definitely *rhuthmic*.

*Language*, regarded in its real nature, is an enduring thing, and at every moment a *transitory* one. Even its maintenance by writing is always just an incomplete, mummy-like (*mumienartig*) preservation, only needed again in attempting thereby to picture the living utterance. In itself it is no product (*Ergon*), but an activity (*Energiea*). (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 49)

## Rhythm as Articulation of Sounds and Ideas

Now what about rhythm more specifically? It appears in Humboldt's late theory of language in a place close, although a bit different as we shall see, to the one occupied by the "hieroglyph" and later the "harmony" in Diderot's theory of poetry (Michon, 2005).

Aarsleff rightly recalls Humboldt's readings, during his first stay in France (1797-1801), of Condillac and especially Diderot, from whom he borrowed the concepts of "hieroglyph" and "tableau" to account for the paradoxical conjunction of "successivity" and "simultaneity" in language.

[For Diderot] poetry cannot escape the successivity that is now in the nature of the language it must use, but it must all the same strive for simultaneity and synthesis. When the poet is successful, the creation is like a hieroglyph or like the painter's instantaneous "tableau." [...] These conceptions also formed the core of Humboldt's conception of language; when he wrote in German he used the word "Bild" for what he in French called "tableau." (Aarsleff, 1988, p. liii)

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Just as a piece of poetry, each language must be observed as a "hieroglyph", i.e. a "tableau" of the people's soul in motion, and composes with the other languages an ensemble of "hieroglyphs" which "interact", "multiply" and "undergo continued formation."

In the fragments Humboldt observed that a language is not the copy of a people's ideas, but the "total energy of the people, embodied, as if by miracle, in certain sounds." Different languages are not so many nomenclatures for the same thing, but present different views of it. "They are hieroglyphs in which each individual [whether a person or a people] imprints its imagination and the world." And since "the world and the imagination links one formation to another by analogy, these hieroglyphs interact in further creation, multiply, and undergo continued formation." [...] Humboldt repeated this argument about the hieroglyphs in closely similar formulations in 1812 and 1821, and he made the same point even when he did not use the word hieroglyph. (*Fragments*, 1801, quoted and commented by Aarsleff, 1988, p. xlix-l)

But there is more. As Diderot, Humboldt does not use the term rhythm to refer to the metric organization of verse. The rhythm ensures that the language sound production organization fits "the dark ebb and flow of feeling and psyche before it spills into words." Rhythm "by means of sounds" captures the "soul at its deepest."

[Rhythm] represents the dark ebb and flow of feeling and psyche before it spills into words, or when their sound has faded before him. [...] It grows in a freely desired fullness, binds itself to form ever new creations, it is a pure form that no material makes heavier, and reveals itself by means of sounds, that is to say, that which seizes the soul at its deepest because it is the closest to the inner feeling. (*Übersetzungen - Agamemnon*, 1816, quoted by C. Couturier-Heinrich, 2004, p. 166)

In his famous *On Language* published in 1836, one year after his death, and which is considered as his intellectual testament, Humboldt couples "rhythm" with "euphony." Both play a crucial role in language production as "synthetic procedure" by which meaning and sound, signified and signifier are synthesized "in the truest sense of the word" as it can be observed firstly in poetry.

The combination of the sound-form with the inner laws of language constitutes the perfection of languages [...] From the first elements onward, the production of language is a *synthetic* procedure, and that in the truest sense of the word, where synthesis creates something that does not lie, *per se*, in any of the conjoined parts. [...] By those very inner stirrings of mind that prepare for language-production, it will be guided on the contrary, towards *euphony* and *rhythm*, will find in both a counterpoise to the mere tinkling of syllables, and discover by means of them a new path, upon which, if the thought do but breathe a soul into the sound, the latter, from its own nature will again return an inspiring principle to thought. The firm combination of the two main linguistic constituents is primarily expressed in the sensuous and imaginative life that thereby blossom in language. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 88)

The "rhythmical and musical form" of speech is first presented, quite traditionally, as the association of two different kinds of "linkage" of "sound" corresponding to accentuation and echoes.

Through the rhythmical and musical form whose linkages are peculiar to sound, language enhances the impression of beauty in nature, transposing it into another sphere, but acts, even independently of this, through the mere cadence of speech upon the temper of the soul. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 60)

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Further down, Humboldt refers both to "rhythm" and "melody" to emphasize that there never is a separation between concepts, thoughts, on the one hand, and sounds, words, sentences, on the other. In speech those are tightly linked together or better yet, intertwined by "the sound-formation, artistically treated in its melody and rhythm, [which] reciprocally arouses in the soul a closer union of the ordering power of understanding with pictorially creative fantasy."

Yet both of them, inner linguistic sense and sound, so far as it accedes to the former's demands, are in cooperation, and the treatment of *sound-unity* thereby becomes a symbol of the particular *conceptual unity* desired. The latter, thus embodied in sound, is diffused as a mental principle over speech, and the sound-formation, artistically treated in its melody and rhythm, reciprocally arouses in the soul a closer union of the ordering power of understanding with pictorially creative fantasy; [...] The means of designating word-unity in speech are, the *pause*, *change of letters*, and *accent*. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 110-111)

The "urge towards rhythmical proportion" with "delight in euphony" guide in most human languages the forming of polysyllabic words.

Just as Chinese resists the polysyllabic character [...] so other languages have the opposite tendency. Through delight in euphony and the urge towards rhythmical proportions, they proceed towards the forming of larger word-wholes. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 266)

In Chinese however or in languages close to it, where words are mainly monosyllabic, the rhythm as organization of the accents in words almost disappears - except in a few cases - and we must assume that only the "musical" element of "euphony" remains as the "ordering power."

Precisely those languages that are less happy in the fusion of syllables into unity, string a larger number of them unrhythmically together, where the completed urge to unity conjoins fewer in harmonious way. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 267)

But Humboldt also uses rhythm in a broader sense closer to Diderot's definition which seems this time to include euphony. "Relationship pleasing to utterance and ear" is produced by forming "rhythmical segments" and treating them "as auditory wholes." Since it organizes the flow of speech, rhythm is actually essential to *the whole dynamic synthesis through articulation of "linguistic sense" and "sound" which is also articulation of the latter with the former*. Humboldt sees it acting already both in the "ordered regularity" of the former and in the "rhythmical segments" of the latter.



Since all thought consists in separating and combining, the linguistic sense's requirement, to depict all the different kinds of conceptual unity symbolically in speech, must automatically be roused, and show up in language in proportion to its alertness and ordered regularity. The sound, on the other hand, seeks to bring its various juxtaposed modifications into a relationship pleasing to utterance and ear. Often it thereby smooths out difficulties merely, or follows organically established customs. But it goes further, forms rhythmical segments, and treats them as auditory wholes. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 110)

The "musical element" found in language which now includes both accentuation and echoes is the same than that found in poetry and *vice versa*. Thus its "beauty" is the "touchstone of its inner and universal perfection."

Concepts are conveyed in language by tones, and the concord of all mental powers is therefore coupled with a *musical element*, which on entering into language, does not abandon, but merely modifies, its nature. The *artistic beauty* of language is not therefore loaned to it as casual adornment, but is, on the contrary, an essentially necessary consequence of the rest of its nature, an infallible touchstone of its inner and universal perfection. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 91)

This does not mean though that all metric feature disappear from language theory. As in Schlegel the metric of accentuation is only treated as a part of a larger rhythm concept, which means not reduced to verse. While discussing "the shaping of the whole word," i.e. the distribution of accents in it, Humboldt notes that there is a kind of

"*law of compensation*," whereby a strengthening or weakening that occurs in one part of the word gives rise to an opposite change in another part, to restore the balance. In this latter formation here, the qualitative character of the letters is disregarded. The sense of language stresses only the more immaterial quantitative element, and treats the word in quasi-metrical fashion, as a rhythmic series. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 123)

Further down, Humboldt analyzes in the same fashion the phenomenon of emphasis.

More than any other part of language, emphasis is subject to the dual influence of the meaningfulness of speech and the metrical composition of sounds. Originally, and in its true shape, it undoubtedly proceeds from the former. But the more the taste of a nation is directed also to rhythmical and musical beauty, the more influence upon emphasis is also accorded to this requirement. (*On Language*, 1836, trans. H. Aarsleff, p. 126)

Nevertheless these uses of the term rhythm as meter are not only quite rare, but they are integrated into a larger definition which is actually quite close to Diderot's and the German Romantics'.

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As that of Goethe, Humboldt's rhythmological contribution certainly deserves a larger study than the one I could devote to it. Once more, I hope that someone will be interested in elaborating further the few sketches I was able to draw. Anyhow, the first results of our inquiry show the huge difference between his theory of rhythm and most of those developed during the same period, and why Humboldt's seemingly outdated thought is actually so important to rhythmology.

1. Since he claims the primacy of language as an activity (*Thätigkeit*) supported by the body;
2. rejects the semiotic model which transforms language into a tool-box or a mere series of "mummy-like" artifacts (*Dictionaries*);

3. develops the concepts of interaction (*Wechselwirkung*), interactive system and organization of the flow of speech through articulation;

4. he not only opposes frontally the use of rhythm developing in life sciences based on series, periods and alternation, or that elaborated in metric by Hermann while reducing it to linearity and meter;

5. but he also radically rejects the Schellingian and Hegelian Idealist models which reduce rhythm to cycles, periods or meters, and assert the primacy of Nature or Spirit over Language and Man while rejecting Modernity.

His conception of rhythm, based on what we may call a "radically historical anthropology," has nothing to do with any of this three kinds of theory. Instead, it is, in my opinion, quite close to Diderot's.

Unfortunately Humboldt was quite isolated in his lifetime (1767-1835) [1] and eventually the reception of his work was increasingly difficult. Either technique or idealism penetrated aesthetics, poetics, metrics, and even linguistic. Artistic experience was not taken into account anymore. As soon as 1850, Humboldt's thought was dismembered between philosophy of history, theory of worldviews and study of languages and his contribution to rhythmology completely forgotten. Due to this rapid disappearance and the domination of metrics, idealist philosophy and science, the *rhuthmos* was ignored for at least two decades until it was re-discovered during the 1860s mainly by artists who first of all wanted to get rid of the traditional constraints in their arts. It is only during the second half of the 20th century that Humboldt's rhythmological contribution reemerged thanks to various scholars (see Meschonnic, 1975; Aarsleff, 1988; Trabant, 1992).

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[1] With the probably ignored and still today unnoticed exception of Wordsworth (1770-1850). Aarsleff compares him to Humboldt and underlines his attention to rhythm: "Wordsworth also said that 'language and the human mind act and react on each other', and it was precisely the reason that the right choice of diction became the poet's first problem." (Aarsleff, 1988, p. xxviii). About Wordsworth and rhythm, see the third part of the beautiful book by F. Gaillet-de-Chezelles, *Wordsworth et la marche: parcours poétique et esthétique*, Grenoble, Ellug, 2007.