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## Humboldt's Challenge to Cognitive Linguistics : a Few Brief Reflections on the Linguistic Patterning of Truth in Czech, French, English and German

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## II. ROZPRAWY I ANALIZY

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HUMBOLDT'S CHALLENGE TO COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS:  
A FEW BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON THE LINGUISTIC PATTERNING  
OF TRUTH IN CZECH, FRENCH, ENGLISH AND GERMAN

Artykuł dotyczy w głównej mierze kwestii metodologicznych; autor skupia się na problemach związanych ze stosowaniem pojęcia *obrazu świata* w badaniach naukowych, w szczególności lingwistycznych. Wskazuje na nieostrość tego terminu, odnoszonego zarówno do indywidualnego sposobu postrzegania świata, jak i do sądów utrwalonych w kulturze. Stwierdza, iż znajomość bliskiej mu myśli Wilhelma von Humboldta jest niewystarczająca w Wielkiej Brytanii i Ameryce. Tym, co – zdaniem autora – często umyka badaczom powołującym się na Humboldtowskie rozumienie *obrazu świata*, jest opozycja: *Ergon* vs. *Energeia*. Mimo iż te terminy są przytaczane w pracach naukowych, językoznawstwo angielskie i amerykańskie nie wykorzystuje owego rozróżnienia, toteż lingwiści traktują przedmiot swych badań zwykle jako „obiekt”, nie zaś jako wymianę zachodzącą między komunikującymi się podmiotami, podczas gdy – w teorii Humboldta – język bardziej niż „rzeczą” był zdolnością, z której korzysta człowiek, by zrozumieć świat. W tej koncepcji język jest w tym jedynie sensie „obiektywny”, że ma charakter ponadjednostkowy – rozmówcy dzielą znaczenia i negocjują je.

Tekst odnosi się również do dyskusji nad hipotezą Sapira-Whorfa, w której w ostatnich dekadach ukształtowały się dwa opozycyjne stanowiska: „obrońców różnorodności” oraz „obrońców psychicznej jedności gatunku ludzkiego”. Przedstawicielem tych drugich jest Steven Pinker. Autor odnosi się bardzo krytycznie do przyjętych przez niego założeń metodologicznych, zarzucając mu zwłaszcza aprioryczne uznawanie za uniwersalne pojęć swoistych dla języka angielskiego oraz brak zainteresowania badaniami porównawczymi. Źródłem takiej postawy upatruje w „transcendentalnym naukowym idealizmie” gramatyki generatywnej Noama Chomsky'ego. Wyraża natomiast apatę dla empirycznych studiów porównawczych nad uniwersaliami, prowadzonych przez Annę Wierzbicką.

Autor porusza także problem, wpisującej się w hipotezę Sapira-Whorfa, koncepcji determinizmu językowego i jej funkcjonowania w lingwistyce. Wskazuje na ograniczoną rolę tego zjawiska w teorii Humboldta, akcentującego twórczą zdolność użytkownika języka, który – dzięki pracy umysłu (*Geist*) – zdolny jest wytyczać nowe szlaki konceptualne. Ubolewa również nad niedostateczną recepcją myśli Edwarda Sapira – w dzisiejszej dobie renesansu antropologii lingwistycznej, zwłaszcza w Stanach Zjednoczonych, przeoczono Sapirowskie rozważania o kreatywności w języku, o podmiotowości i indywidualnym kształtowaniu systemu językowego przez jego użytkowników. Podczas gdy anglojęzyczni językoznawcy rzadko odnoszą się w sposób szczegółowy do dzieła Sapira, żyje ono w polskiej szkole etnolingwistycznej (Bartmiński, Wierzbicka).

Autor zajmuje także stanowisko wobec współczesnej lingwistyki kognitywnej, zwracając uwagę na to, że drugie pokolenie językoznawców stosujących tę metodologię często wpada w pułapkę nowego „językoznawstwa bez języka”, gdyż obowiązujący dziś paradygmat zachęca do praktykowania złego zwyczaju badania relacji między słowami i myślami w obrębie anglojęzycznego obrazu świata oraz do apriorycznego przyjmowania założeń o uniwersalnym charakterze konceptualizacji wpisanych we własny język, co dotyczy głównie języka angielskiego. Podkreśla jednak wartość inspirowanych kognitywizmem badań porównawczych, w szczególności dotyczących metafor (wymienia takie ośrodki badawcze, jak Praga i Lublin); zauważa przy tym, iż zadziwiająco mało tego typu studiów przeprowadza się w krajach angielskiego obszaru językowego.

W analitycznej części artykułu autor zawarł uwagi dotyczące pojęcia PRAWDY w języku czeskim, francuskim, angielskim i niemieckim, skupiając się na różnicach językowych konceptualizacji tego zjawiska. Zasygnalizował odmienności angielskiego *truth* od czeskiego *pravda*, uwidaczniające się w – zaskakujących dla użytkowników języka angielskiego – semantycznych, morfologicznych i fonetycznych związkach czeskiej jednostki leksykalnej z wyrazami *opravdový*, *spravedlivý*, *právo*, czyli ze słowami odnoszącymi się do sprawiedliwości, prawodawstwa i uczciwości. Wskazał też na różnice użycia angielskiego *truth* i niemieckiego *Wahr*, a także na odmiennosc relacji etymologicznych, w jakie wchodzi *truth* w porównaniu z francuskim *vrai*, które dało początek *vraisemblable* ‘prawdopodobny’, tłumaczonemu na angielski jako *likely*. Poruszył także problem semantycznego wymiaru gramatycznej kategorii rodzaju, zadając pytanie, dlaczego francuskie *vérité*, niemieckie *Wahrheit* i czeskie *pravda* są rodzaju żeńskiego. W rozważaniach nad wpływem *gender* na nasze życie umysłowe powołał się na Voltaire’a i Simone de Beauvoir, jak również na twórczość literacką Fénélon, rzucającą nowe światło na kwestię „żeńskości” francuskiej *vérité*; przywołał także poezję Františka Halasa, stosującego łacińskie słowo *luna* z tego powodu, że jego czeski odpowiednik *měsíc* jest rodzaju męskiego – w tym zabiegu dostrzec można znamiona romantycznej feminizacji twórczości oraz natury. Uwidaczniający się w literaturze kreatywny wymiar komunikacji nie ogranicza się, zdaniem autora, do jednego tylko stylu, przeciwnie – porozumiewanie się w języku zakłada negocjacje między tradycją a innowacją, między kulturą a tym, co indywidualne i wreszcie między umysłami interlokutorów, co stawia lingwistów wobec wyzwania, w jaki sposób zdać sprawę z tych mechanizmów.

## Worldview and the “languageless” linguistics

The term “worldview” has become almost indispensable for a wide range of academic disciplines. We speak of a “Western worldview”, a “Marxist-Leninist worldview” and a “Christian worldview”. And it is because of the importance the “existentialist worldview” gained in the second half of the Twentieth century, and because of the increasing relativism associated with the term “worldview” itself, that the American Christian scholar, David K. Naugle, decided to trace the development of this word in the English language in his *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (2002). This was part of an attempt to promote the Christian worldview as a universal philosophy of the “heart”. This defense of a worldview, which is both universal and personal, marks a new emerging usage of the word in English. While ideologies seem to bear down upon us, we seem to believe that our worldview will allow each of us to carve the contours of “our world” when giving expression to thoughts and feelings. And this is indeed the worldview of which we speak when we talk of a poet's or a playwright's worldview (Shakespeare's worldview, for example), or when we speak of an author transforming our own personal worldview.

Yet this does not exhaust our definition of worldview: both the personal definition (preferred by individuals and literary scholars) and the cultural one (adopted by sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers) contrast with the definition linguists often attribute to the term, when they claim that “a foreign language is a different world”. From that perspective, students of language must prepare themselves to enter into “alterity” when they learn to grapple with the different strategies of categorization and linguistic patterning to be found in the foreign tongue they choose to learn. This concept of “worldview” is much-debated: debate in recent decades has, however, invariably tended to focus upon “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”, and, in recent years, has increasingly tended to oppose “defenders of diversity” against “defenders of the psychic unity of mankind”. There is an encouraging renaissance going on in linguistic anthropology in the States with such defenders as Alessandro Duranti (1997), Salzman (1999), William A. Foley (1997; 2004/2006), and Marcel Danesi (2004). However, the concept of worldview as Humboldt would have understood the term *Weltansicht*, the mode of understanding and expressing the world which a given language system opens up to us, is not always investigated in depth in the work of such authors. Linguistic anthropology tends to focus on language rather than speech, on structure and grammar rather than on discourse and communication. Disappointingly, even those linguistic anthropologists who are animated by a reappraisal of Whorf's work (see Lee 1996; Duranti 1997; Danesi 2004) seem wholly ignorant of Humboldt's project, though linguistic anthropologists do, from time to time, make reference to a “Humboldtian tradition”.

An authentically Humboldtian tradition lives on in France in the work of Meschonnic, in the work of Trabant, in Germany and in the work of Polish scholars writing on the Polish “worldview” (*obraz świata*, see Bartmiński). Nevertheless, a divide – almost unbridgeable – has come to separate the concern for ideological worldviews, *Weltanschauungen*, and the interpretation of languages as frameworks for understanding the world. This debate should be going on in English-speaking countries, and cognitive linguistics, if its ambition is to open up the mind to understanding, must take up this challenge. The question is whether English-speaking scholars are willing to open up to this debate. Scholars such as Anna Wierzbicka, who have devoted their lives to such questions, have not been able to avoid confronting skeptics who refuse to conceive of the possibility that thought is at one level language-dependant (Wierzbicka 1997; 1999).

Steven Pinker has modified his position since he scorned linguistic relativity in 1994, when he claimed that the idea that ‘the foundational categories of reality are not “in” the world but are composed by one’s culture [. . .] is wrong, all wrong’ (1994: 57). His initial attempt to debunk the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” has been widely criticized. In his more recent work, Pinker has shown himself more open to the idea that language may in fact ‘frame an event’ (2007: 126). But the structure of his arguments and the examples he discusses (2007: 124–151) make it plain that what is at stake is taking to task the majority of “neo-Whorfians” who, in Pinker’s opinion, are “featherbeddish” and obscure. He takes much pleasure in satirizing the titles of their works: ‘language can affect the way you think’ and ‘language can restructure cognition’ (*ibid.* 135). Clearly, Pinker still feels unrepentantly self-assured today. The words he used in 1994 (67): ‘As a cognitive scientist I can afford to be smug about [. . .] linguistic determinism being a conventional absurdity’, still seem to reflect his position today. And the title of his 2007 work, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*, makes it plain on which side of this debate Pinker situates himself.

Pinker believes in a transcendental human nature, and he believes language to be a royal threshold allowing entry into that conceptual realm. This is above all a conviction, one which will be understood by sympathizers as “an article of faith”, and by less sympathetic scholars as “pure prejudice”. At any rate, with Pinker, we have clearly exited the university, the enlightened institution of empirical study, tentative speculation and academic discussion. The affirmations of Pinker do not belong to the tradition to which Bacon and Locke belonged when they sought to move from doubt towards certainty through the meticulous scrutiny of the object under study. Pinker is ultimately not interested in other languages: and the fact that he uses English as the prism through which to

view humanity and to enter into contact with the universal nature of Man and his mode of conceptualizing the universe, makes it plain that he subscribes to what the German linguistic anthropologist, Jürgen Trabant, has called the new “languageless linguistics”.

Numerous researchers working in comparative linguistics (for example Mi-kołajczuk 1998, 2004, Vaňková 2001, 2005, 2007), and notably the researchers who have been investigating cross-cultural metaphor configurations over the past decade ([www.metaphorik.de](http://www.metaphorik.de)), have found inspiration in cognitive research. It is not a question of rejecting the cognitive project. Indeed such scholars have shown interesting ways in which to adapt cognitive methodology and explore cognitive hypotheses. But it is remarkable that little of such scholarship is being carried out in English-speaking countries. Interesting and informed, empirical work, capable of pushing back the frontiers of understanding when it comes to exploring the linguistic patterning of different linguistic systems, is taking place more in Prague than in Paris, more in Lublin than in California.

The [www.metaphorik.de](http://www.metaphorik.de) website, founded in Hamburg, gathers together principally European scholars. The vast majority of cognitive researchers publishing on-line and in Anglo-American journals tend (like Emanatian 1995, 1999) to take their cue from Lakoff in seeking to determine to what degree other languages can be fitted into conclusions and hypotheses generated from the study of English. The inevitable (and perverse) result of such an approach is that researchers seek to verify whether the organizing principles of other languages correspond to the structure of English, without seeking to understand these languages in and of themselves, or how their essential natures can, by contrast, enlighten us as to the character and the nature of the English language system.

Second-generation cognitive linguistics has all too often fallen prey to the new “languageless linguistics”. All ages have their epidemics. The reigning paradigm in linguistics today encourages the bad habit of investigating the relationship between words and thought exclusively within the English-speaking worldview. Translators, bilinguals, polyglots and the speakers of other languages will find this reduction of “languages” to “a language”, namely English, both grotesque and absurd. Monolingual English-speakers, on the other hand, suffer from the fact that they are necessarily naïve when it comes to intuiting the different worldviews of other languages. Even advanced students will tend to try to conceive of foreign conceptual patterning within the patterning of their own language-system. We try to translate words like *Heimat* into “homeland”, and only when we realize that a language such as French has no obvious translation for either of these terms, does it become clear to us that we are dealing not with clearly-defined realities, but with culturally-determined concepts. At this point, we realize that our intellectual and emotional capacity to express our relationship

to others and to the world must seek out different strategies in order to negotiate these concepts.

Attempts to define “the way *we* think” and the irrepressible desire to find universals have, in recent years, been inspired by the will to discover an underlying “unity” to human culture. This trend has tended to displace the concept of “mind” – which is clearly both cultural and personal – by imposing a taxonomy and a methodology more fitted to cognitive science which focuses on the “hardwiring” of the “brain”. Indeed, it is curious that a tradition so sensitive to metaphor study should slip into such a naïve use of rhetoric. The use of fashionable IT metaphors seeks to make more palatable the declared aim to reach an “objective” study of language and thought in humankind. Such an attempt owes much to Chomsky’s generative linguistics, against which George Lakoff revolted (at least in part). But despite that revolt, in recent years it has become clear that those brought up on Chomsky cannot prevent themselves from perpetuating his transcendental scientific idealism. Pinker’s self-satisfied assertions of truths about the universal nature of language merely serve as reminders that one generation’s hypotheses can take hold of the imagination and become the unshakable convictions of the next.

Sadly, faith makes a poor substitute for erudition. The real work on universals and linguistic diversity is not taking place in the now well-established party game which allows Pinker and the neo-Whorfians to slug it out. Serious empirically-informed work on a multitude of languages is rare, and the quest for universals will remain precisely that: “a quest”, an ideal to be striven after. Like the Holy Grail, we can grasp out for universals, but never grasp them, never possess them: for who can master all the languages of the world? At best, mastering the basic grammar of a few dozens of languages might be achieved. This is the project of Stephen C. Levinson, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. His team has been working on the conception of “space” in Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages for the past fifteen years. The results are both intriguing and perplexing: Levinson (2003) finds that many non-Indo-European languages do not, in fact, induce speakers to conceive of space in terms of the speaking subject. Right and left are notions which do not figure in all languages. Certain languages would appear to use a very sensitive form of “dead-reckoning” which cultivates in speakers the capacity to refer to objects in space and to describe scenarios using a conception of space similar to our compass.

Wierzbicka (1996/2004), on the other hand, in pursuing universals by empirical study, has reduced the number of such key trans-cultural concepts to a very limited number of “primes” such as “you”, “I”, “someone”, “people”, “can”, “very” and “like” to name a few. These are the conclusions of decades

of linguistic investigation. They do not constitute established facts. And indeed, it would be inappropriate to make sweeping statements about all existing languages. These are what we might call “informed hypotheses” which will be borne out or abandoned with further study. The epistemological approach is wholly different from that of Pinker and Chomsky. Wierzbicka and Levinson do not begin with conviction: they move with Bacon from doubt towards a more founded degree of certainty. And for that very reason, it is by walking with Levinson and Wierzbicka that we are likely to advance in our understanding of the different nature of languages, and in our understanding of what is essential to all forms of language as a human faculty of expression and understanding. Ultimately, we cannot hope to learn much about the relationship between thought and language by prolonging the Pinker-neo-Whorfian debate.

Ironically, this is all the more true since Pinker's criticisms of the neo-Whorfians are far from unfounded in many instances. The neo-Whorfians do adhere to a dogma of their own, that of the celebration of “alterity”. But such thinkers do not always rigorously interrogate Whorf's arguments, and two fundamental objections must be leveled at those who celebrate the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”:

1. Research tends to lump Whorf and Sapir together and reduce their stances to a few standard quotes. (The same quotes are to be found in French and English encyclopedias of linguistics for example).

2. Very little consideration is given to Sapir's work. His consideration of creativity in language, of personality and the individual shaping of the language system within actual speakers are wholly effaced from this hypothesis. Indeed it is curious that while Sapir lives on in the Polish school of ethnolinguistics in the work of Bartmiński (2009) and in Wierzbicka's work (1997), English-speaking linguists rarely refer to his work in any great detail.

This is a disappointing development: because closing off to Sapir means turning away from speech and discourse. It means leaving the speaking, thinking, living individual behind. In 1987, at the beginning of the first wave of cognitive science, Lakoff made what was, in that context, a fairly brave affirmation: ‘Like Whorf, I believe that differences in conceptual systems affect behavior in a significant way’ (Lakoff 1987: 337). He declared himself open to the different ways other cultures and languages (like gene pools) contributed to the richness of humanity, and for that very reason (like Hagège in France and Crystal in Britain), Lakoff advocated the protection of disappearing languages. But Lakoff was laboring under no illusions: he knew very well that ‘For the past few decades, most “responsible” scholars have steered clear of relativism. It has become a *bête noire*, identified with scholarly irresponsibility, fuzzy thinking, lack of rigor and even immorality’ (idem. 304). Lakoff started out by making a stand for world-



views in the context of a largely unsympathetic American tradition which was unwilling to take Whorf's questions seriously and which refused to acknowledge the importance of Sapir's concerns about the way individuals live in language and mould it with their personality in speech.

Lakoff's pioneering spirit did not take him personally very deeply into comparative linguistics, however. And within the ethnocentric context that Lakoff himself so eloquently described, the "languageless linguistics" of second-generation cognitive linguistics has imposed itself once more. Contemporary cognitive linguists tend to steer clear of diversity and relativism, and have tended to focus upon thinking primarily within the English-language system, naïvely using its concepts and systems of categorizations as "universal" frameworks of investigation. The lack of knowledge of other languages no doubt goes a long way to explaining this naïveté, but this does not explain why the Frenchman, Fauconnier, for example, tends to avoid all consideration of cross-lingual differences and focus on English in his quest to understand what he and Turner call "our" way of thinking.

### **Humboldt's contribution**

It would seem then that worldview is still not a particularly welcome concept in American linguistics. It came to be viewed with suspicion during the Cold War, at a time when the idea that language can influence thought was associated with propaganda and manipulation in the Orwellian sense of worldview: then Chomsky's formalistic search for a fundamental grammar tended to steer linguistics away from considering the way cultures and individuals construct meaning. Worldview, as Whorf conceived it, came to be associated with relativism and sloppy thinking at the outset of cognitive linguistics. Furthermore, if cognitive linguists persist in pursuing a tangible materialist confirmation of hypotheses concerning "the functioning of the brain", while refusing to question the implicitly metaphysical postulate driving its "quest for universals" of a transcendental nature, then it seems unlikely that the exploration of worldview is going to take root within American linguistics in the generation to come. For understanding worldviews entails the empirical investigation of language-cultures as independent cultural adventures of an intellectual, spiritual, emotional and perceptual nature.

For this reason, it is necessary to unearth the thinker to whom the concept of worldview is regularly attributed, Wilhelm von Humboldt. While Humboldt still has a real place in German thought and linguistics, and while he has been taken up as a source of inspiration in certain countries (such as Poland, in the Lublin

School), his place is marginal in most cultures. Attempts to transform linguistics in France in recent decades using Humboldt's conception of language and his concept of worldview have had some impact (see Meschonnic, Trabant, Auroux *et al.*). But in Britain and in the States, despite works on Humboldt (Langham Brown 1967, Manchester 1985 and Underhill 2009) and despite Peter Heath's retranslation of Humboldt's founding work, his Introduction to the Kawi language, entitled *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, in 1999, Humboldt has had little impact on the way linguistics is taught or practiced in Britain or America. Humboldt's name is quoted in most encyclopaedia's when worldview or linguistic relativism is discussed, but his works are not. Hegel, Heidegger and Chomsky all quote Humboldt as a source of inspiration, but the concerns of those philosophers and the linguist are, as Jürgen Trabant demonstrated in his *Traditions de Humboldt* (1999), wholly different from Humboldt's concern for an empirically-founded investigation into the worldviews languages open up to members of their linguistic communities.

What was specific about Humboldt's approach to language then? What was lost? Humboldt belonged to another era, not a pre-scientific era, but an era in which science was not yet suffering from the schism that sets the hard sciences against the humanities, and which entices those in linguistics to aspire to a "scientific" approach which practices what Birch calls "the flight from subjectivity" (quoted in Wierzbicka 1999: 1). For Humboldt, all language was human-based, it derives from and revolves around the speaking individual, the man or woman situated in the construction of a meaningful exchange. Language outside of this context does not exist for Humboldt. This does not mean that we cannot construct a concept of French, English, Polish or Czech. It simply means that this construction is precisely that, a construction. When we make the mistake of taking our abstraction for a reality, we lose sight of the essential living language which our methodology should allow us to study.

To hammer home this point, Humboldt stressed that language was a "producing" and not a "product" (1999: 48) in his opposition between *Ergon* and *Energieia* (1999: 49). Though this opposition is much-cited by Humboldt scholars, the repercussions of this distinction have yet to make themselves felt in linguistics in Anglo-American circles. Language continues to be spoken of as an "object" in contemporary linguistics. We speak of "language use" and the "function of language" as though it were a simple "tool". But this was exactly what Humboldt was taking issue with. Language was, he believed, no "object". It was the ongoing exchange between "subjects". Language was not an instrument of communication for Humboldt but the *Organ des Denkens* (2003: 168), the organ of thinking (a concept he had inherited from Hamann and Herder).

More than a “thing”, language was a faculty which we use to understand the world. To this extent, Humboldt was a neo-Kantian: he believed that the faculty of understanding could not simply be reduced to the passive perception of reality as the British Empiricists tended to understand it. Kant taught that perception involves ordering, and ordering implies the active work of the mind. Humboldt transposed this process (attributed by Kant to the transcendental Man who was his conceptual model) to the community to which speaking individuals belonged. That is to say, Humboldt attributed it to the language system which they shared and sustained through communication. Language is “objective” for Humboldt in that it is “supra-subjective”. We share meanings. We negotiate them. But for this very reason, language is always fluid and never fixed (1999: 62). Our attempts to fix it, to curtail it and define it, are reasonable to the extent that any attempt to study a subject must involve definition, but the models we construct will become deceptive prisons, illusions, if we take them for representing faithfully the inevitably intangible fleeting exchange of words and ideas which takes place in speech.

Humboldt’s concept of language (*Sprache*) held together both speaking and thinking, but he did not confuse them: he argued that understanding and speaking are simply different effects of the power of speech. This goes some way to helping us escape from the pitfall that critics of linguistic relativism (such as Pinker) are wary of. Humboldt does not exclude reflection, free will and creativity. Pinker, as a linguist and as a human being, rightly cherishes such qualities and refuses to accept a conception of language which abandons them. Language does not direct thought in the sense that it prevents us from expressing certain ideas and forces us to express others. It offers up paths for understanding, conceptual highways and byways which we can follow from one place to another, changing course as we go. If we wish, we can strike out on new routes. This creative capacity was fundamental for Humboldt. It was what he called the work of the “mind” (*Geist*). This was, moreover, in Humboldt’s opinion, the only credible account for the origin of language. Who could have invented language except mankind? In this way, Humboldt radically transformed the question of origin from an objective historical reality to an ongoing subjective becoming. Language was continually reinvented by the power of interacting minds.

Language, he believed, could only exist within the mind. Though texts allow us to hand down our ideas, our thoughts and our visions of the world, ultimately, texts only have meaning in as much as our language lives on within the imagination. Words are not bricks that can be extracted from language, or stacked together to form it. It is the patterning of the language’s “structure” (*Sprachbau*) within which we live as a linguistic community (and which lives within us) which is essential: because this enables us to interpret texts and rekindle the

relations between words. Creativity was not about breaking out of language (as modernist writers and postmodernists conceive it). Creativity was an inalienable facet of language and culture, of individuals and of communities. Language only exists as 'a reshaping activity' Humboldt argued (1999: 50).

One of the problems of sorting out what we mean by "worldview" is that political theory and discourse analysis often have a very manipulative model of language in mind. Adorno, Foucault and Williams are all interested in the way over-arching ideologies influence thought and the way dominant discourse imposes itself upon the individual. But this only highlights one form of language at the cost of obscuring other forms of expression. Humboldt, for his part, could not have conceived of language as an oppressive inhuman force which limited thought. The idea of a "prison-house" of language would have struck him as absurd. Humboldt was interested in 'the mind of the people' (150), and that "mind" was engendered in a language system which did indeed transcend the individual. But for him no language could efface the "individuality" of the speaking subject which continues to act upon the language system and upon the mind of the people. A language without this "living individuality" within it would be no language. It would be of no use for thinking and reflecting upon life, for expressing the attempts of individuals to communicate with one another.

Ultimately, what interested Humboldt was the way different individuals continued to stimulate language, thereby reawakening their fellow individuals to its innate creativity. For language is the shared faculty of understanding for a linguistic community, their point of interaction, the meeting place at which they come together to crystallize as a culture. Humboldt believed that as human beings spiraled into language, language spiraled outwards to envelop the world. This "world" was always a construction for Humboldt, but it was a construction which had a very real significance. There is no intellectual nihilism in Humboldt. He is a child of the enlightenment with the same earnest passion for knowledge and the same curiosity for human nature and culture that can be found in Locke, Leibniz and Goethe. Words enable us to act upon the world. The efficiency of language is demonstrated by our ability to shape and transform the world by using it. To this degree, words do relate to things. But for Humboldt what we call "things" – and by this he meant not only abstract ideas like "truth", but also everyday objects such as "apples" – can only be taken into consciousness using language. Until we have words which allow us to distinguish between apples and pears, between tangerines and mandarins, between whales and fish, between violins and violas, we inevitably find ourselves forced to reach out for more indirect, more elaborate, forms of designation. The concepts offered up to us by language enable us to form these distinctions, but however meaningful and fundamental those distinctions may appear to us once we have assimilated

them – however “real” they seem – they remain language-dependant. They are meaningful, but their meaning is learned culturally and conceptually as we learn to speak.

Like Sapir and Whorf, Humboldt believed that different languages carve up the world using different conceptual categories and by exploring different forms of patterning and organization. French for example distinguishes between *sonnette*, *cloche* and *sonnerie* where the English-speaker would speak of bells: the “doorbell”, the “church bell” or the “alarm bell”. Word construction by compounding (in examples such as these) was something to which Humboldt was very sensitive in English and German (1999: 100–108). Languages also move from the concrete to the abstract in different ways and to different degrees. Words can take on metaphoric meanings, and they can lose some of their concrete meanings through doing so. “Superior” has become an abstract term relating to rank in English (though the adjective can be transformed into a noun to refer to a person or function: a man’s superior). In French, however, this term has not relinquished its concrete anchorage: *supérieur* can be used in everyday spoken French to refer to the “upper” shelf or the “upper” floor. Inversely, while, in English, the adjective “shallow” can be applied to both water (a concrete use) and to people (a metaphoric use), *superficiel* has been employed so exclusively in a metaphoric sense in French that its original physical dimension has been lost to the imagination. For this reason Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1968) consider the fact that “shallow” has no direct translation into French to be a “failing” or “gap” (*une lacune*) in French.

Languages help us “sort out” the world, and find our bearings. The real world was conceived of by Humboldt as a “bewildering chaos” (1999: 48). But the mind can impose form on chaos. Our “mental power” as human beings enables us to form unity out of the infinite and infinitely complex impressions we have of the real world. This involves ‘the drawing together of the scattered features into the image of an organic whole’ (48). Language builds up as crystals form upon one another, binding firmly and logically, but freely. No determinism is involved here, but neither is the organizing process arbitrary. Patterning builds up over time through the struggle of individual minds to express themselves and to share their meanings with other people. In contradistinction to Structuralist models of language, it is this meaningful process of organizing and juxtaposing meanings that Humboldt had in mind when he spoke of “the form of language” (1999: 51). “Form” implies the “formation” of meaningful patterning, the “tuning” of the “organ” which will enable expression (to transform Humboldt’s organic metaphor in to a musical one).

Humboldt believed that each language not only contained a living individuality, a dynamic supra-subjectivity, he believed that the linguist’s real endeavor

was to distinguish between the different “forms” that each language presented. He transposed his metaphor of subjectivity onto comparative linguistics and spoke of “the character of languages”. This entails his concept of “worldview”. He believed that ‘there exists in each language a characteristic *world-view*. As the individual sound [of the word] stands between man and the object, so the entire language steps in between him and the nature that operates both inwardly and outwardly, upon him’. (60) The paradoxical spatial representation is problematic here, but is nonetheless poignant. Each of us exists within the worldview of the language, but the worldview exists nowhere if it does not exist within us as individuals. One dimension of the worldview acts upon the other. The human being ‘spins language out of him[and her-]self’ (*ibid.*), but the human being simultaneously ‘spins him[and her-]self into it,’ (*ibid.*). Humboldt argued that ‘every language draws about the people it possesses a circle’ (*ibid.*). On this point Humboldt fully coincides with Whorf who sought an escape from English in his studies of other languages. Because, the only way out of one language, was, Humboldt believed, made possible by ‘stepping over into the circle of another one’ (*ibid.*). To this degree Humboldt and Whorf were animated by the same spirit which combined, on the one hand, an urgent yearning to explore other frontiers of understanding and, on the other, a patient and meticulous attention to empirical data which must be assimilated into organized frameworks of understanding.

## TRUTH

Comparing languages, as Humboldt invites us to do, not only uncovers parallels, it highlights the specific nature of each language system as a mental, spiritual and cultural adventure. Perhaps the best way of illustrating the truth of the hypothesis that concepts do not fully coincide is to take up the analysis of the very concept of “truth” itself in different languages. Is “truth” a secret antechamber that can be entered? Is it a treasure to be discovered? Does truth live within us (as the expression “truthful” implies), or is it a space we live within? These are indeed perplexing questions, but even this task of searching for “truth” immediately implodes, because, as Wierzbicka repeatedly points out, our English concept of “truth” does not exist in other languages, and to search for it is to set off on a philologically doomed quest. In embarking upon such a quest, we would be following the naive philosopher who believes he can intuit a translingual given, an essence, which stands outside of language, a form, an idea (*eidōs*) awaiting designation. In searching for a direct translation in other language systems, we fail to understand that we live in language, and carve our concepts by meaningfully ordering the world around us.

Other languages carve out different concepts, following different trajectories to reach different destinations. Consequently, for the English student, it comes as some surprise that, as Holub and Lyer affirm, the Czech word *pravda* (the word usually used to translate our own term, “truth”) also forms the root of the adjective “real” (*opravdový*) and “fair” (*spravedlivý*). *Spravedlnost* (fairness) derives grammatically from “what is with truth” (*co je s pravdou*). This links the word both semantically, morphologically and phonetically to the word for “right” in Czech, *právo*. Indeed, all words related to justice, jurisprudence, fairness and rights are etymologically linked to truth. It would probably be unfair to see *pravda* (truth) as being the root-form from which all these expressions are derived, but the form and sound of the words reinforce the link between these related concepts within the Czech imagination. Cognitive scholars would probably opt for the term, “the Czech cognitive unconscious”, where Sapir would speak of “patterning” and Humboldt would speak of the *Wechselwirkung* of language.

To frame this within the terms of Humboldt’s project, it is clear that in binding together the words we would translate as “truth”, “fairness” and “right”, Czech minds have struck out on meaningful paths to make rapprochements and fine distinctions. This allows the Czechs to strike their roots into reality and further the expressive potential of their language. The Czech worldview is to be found not in any given individual concepts. Concepts do constitute the sparks which illuminate ideologies (as Raymond Williams shows), and they do illuminate something of each language’s modes of world-perceiving and world-conceiving (as Wierzbicka’s studies show). Nevertheless, a language’s worldview can be intuited far more fully once we understand the relations and the patterning which binds together and positions its concepts. The English-speaker who wishes to enter the Czech worldview must come to understand that whereas he would say: ‘That’s not **fair**’, ‘You’re not being **honest**’, and ‘What you say is not **true**’, all three of the highlighted words would be derived from or related to the word *pravda* if this were said in Czech. When he can do this, the English-speaker is taking his first step along the path that the Czech imagination has opened up. This sends English-speakers on a journey uncharted within their own worldview.

In the same way it takes an effort to the English imagination – and I speak for myself here – to understand how the Germans could have come up with *nicht Wahr?*: or the Czechs, *není liž pravda?* These expressions invoke the word for truth where they would be rendered in English as ‘Isn’t that so?’ (or by question tags like, ‘don’t you?’ or ‘isn’t it?’). And how did the striving of the German *Geist* come to form *Wahrsagerin* (soothsayer), using the root *wahr* (true)? Why did the English mind arrive at “really” when the French – using “true” (*vrai*) – came up with *vraiment*? And how did the French *esprit* arrive at *vraisemblable* where the English mind arrived at “likey”?

Such investigations take us into conceptual patterning: they take us on tours of grammars and force us to consider how individual minds grapple with grammar to forge new meanings. Because grammar does shape and colour the paths the mind takes, though, it cannot be said to “direct” thought. This will become clear if we consider gender. The first thing that strikes us when we take up the comparison of words translating our word for “truth” in French, German and Czech is that all three terms, *vérité*, *Wahrheit* and *Pravda*, are feminine. Is this simply a coincidence? Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, ‘Man feminizes the ideal he sets up before him as the essential Other, because woman is the material representation of alterity’ (de Beauvoir: 211). Language is only one of those ideals enshrined in “alterity” and elevated to a feminized ideal. As de Beauvoir explained:

Woman is Soul and Idea, but she also is a mediatrix between them: she is the divine Grace, leading the Christian towards God, she is Beatrice guiding Dante in the beyond, Laura summoning Petrarch to the lofty summits of poetry. In all the doctrines that unify Nature and Spirit she appears as Harmony, Reason, Truth. The gnostic sects made Wisdom a woman, Sophia, crediting her with the redemption of the world and even its creation (*ibid.*).

What happens to this feminizing trend in language? What influence does gender have on our mental and “spiritual” lives? Through the consolidated choices of individual speakers, we can choose to confirm, exploit and deepen the sexual associations of gender. Individual writers may reinforce existing associations. The French *homme de lettres*, Fénélon (1651–1751), for example, exploits the feminised model of *vérité*, when he says: ‘*La vérité est une reine qui a dans le ciel son trône éternel*’, (Truth is a queen who has her eternal throne in the sky, Littré: 1638, my translation). Fénélon is embracing the personification, the feminization, of “truth” in this extrapolation of a linguistic given, a grammatical convention. Fénélon deepens this analogy by distinguishing between two facets of his feminized truth, a beautiful young one and an ageing truth who may have lost her charms but nevertheless acquires a stately virtue: ‘*La vérité n’a ni jeunesse ni vieillesse; les agréments de l’une ne la doivent pas faire aimer d’avantage, et les rides de l’autre ne lui doivent pas attirer plus de respect*’ (Beauty has neither youth nor agedness, the charms of one should not make her loved any the more, nor should the wrinkles of the other earn her any more respect. *ibid.* my translation).

From my perspective, analysing such phrases within the concept of linguistic patterning and worldview as Humboldt would have conceived them, Fénélon shocks the linguist out of his complacent theorisation. Here we must confront the individual man, playing with language and positioning himself in terms of existing conceptual patterning. We cannot speak of language determining thought here, nor would it be appropriate to see Fénélon’s extrapolation as the



act of a free, unfettered mind moving through speech without regard for linguistic convention or existing conventional frames of thought. Neither is this example extraordinary. Speech is often creative and much of the charm of conversation comes from innovating and adapting existing expressions. By paying attention to such innovation, discourse analysis shifts the debate and forces us to reappraise our projects, our methodology and our concepts.

Here, we are clearly not dealing with the relationship between language and brain: we are dealing with how one individual mind develops language. Here we are dealing with the work of the mind in culture: and despite what has been said in some of the more interesting cognitive articles (see Janda, in Vaňková 2007), culture is not dealt with very convincingly in cognitive linguistics. The brain, hardwiring, man as machine, and the programming of culture, these are the fashionable metaphors with which many cognitive scholars are trying to conceive of the relationship between man, language and culture (the traditional philological trinity). The question is, will such sad and soul-destroying metaphors allow us to fashion a very convincing model of the communication of individual men and women living and evolving together within a culture?

What is Fénelon doing? He is not content with existing patterning. Fenelon's quotations are poetical innovations, novel extensions, and they are perceived and received as such. They open up new paths within a language, offering new formulations for its speakers to muse upon. These are not the patterns of our subconscious thought, the patterns that we follow without thinking. They are the divergent expressive explorations of an inquisitive and creative mind, forging new thought within the language system.

Fénelon's innovations do not, however, go against the grain of the language. They do not upset world-conceiving and world-perceiving. Truth (or *vérité* rather) remains feminine in Fénelon's personal world. Nevertheless, a writer's personal world does regularly act upon existing grammatical categories. Voltaire, for example, sees no problem in changing the gender of truth by metamorphosing *vérité* (feminine in French) into a fruit (though *fruit* is masculine): *La vérité est un fruit qui ne doit être cueilli que s'il est tout à fait mûr* (Truth is a fruit which should not be picked until it [he] is quite ripe, Ripert 1993: 422).

This example will be surprising to English-speakers who tend, on the whole, to confuse sex and gender. (The very term "gender" itself has become increasingly ambiguous in recent decades in Anglo-American scholarship). English-speakers find it amusing that young girls should be considered "neuter" in German (*das Fraulein*) while cats (both male and female) are all grouped together and referred to using the feminine gender in German. They find it equally curious that Baudelaire describes his sulky, sultry mistress in terms of *Mon beau chat* (cats being masculine in French). The English imagination has difficulty

understanding the suppleness and subtlety of gender as a form of conceptual categorisation which shapes languages other than their own. As Voltaire's example proves, though gender can colour and shape the way we conceive of something, our own conception can colour and shape gender.

Poets often break out from the constraints of conventional patterning in the way Voltaire does. One striking example can be found in the work of the Czech poet František Halas who operates "a lyrical sex change" on the Czech moon (Halas 1978: 27). The Czech moon, *měsíc*, is masculine and inanimate. But what does Halas do? Halas opts for the Latin term, *luna*, when he says *luna se svlékla k plnoci* (The moon undressed towards midnight). Why? The answer is ultimately quite amusing: *luna* is feminine. Halas wished to muse upon the seductive moon that rose towards midnight undressing itself/herself. Halas was flying on the wings of romanticism (romantic poetry for men with the characteristic feminisation of Creation and Nature). The Latin term, appeared to him as the only option. A butch moon stripping off in the night sky might be more attractive to women in Prague today, but a masculine moon apparently, didn't fit into Halas' lyrical universe. Such examples from Halas and Voltaire force us to face up to the fact that patterning always implies negotiation between tradition and innovation, between a culture and the individual, between the individual mind and the minds of other men and women in the evolving worldview they share.

## Conclusion

Cognitive scholars have made a serious contribution to linguistics with their metaphor theory. Lakoff and Turner (1989) have even convincingly examined and explained ways in which English poets innovate using existing patterning. But sadly, for all the initial openness and enthusiasm of founding cognitive works, the tendency in recent decades to concentrate upon English, coupled with the mistaken belief that we can understand other languages "through" English, is tending to produce a second-generation of cognitive linguistics which is increasingly stunted and narrow-minded. In seeking confirmation for hypotheses and conclusions developed through the examination of English alone, we fail to embark upon the adventure of exploring other linguistic worlds. And this explains to some extent why the enthusiasm which initially animated Lakoff, Johnson and Turner and Sweetser in their early work has tended to taper off in more recent cognitive work. The vibrant discussion of "worldviews" that is continuing in sociology, philosophy, culture studies, in linguistic anthropology in France and Germany, and even in debates concerning the death of languages, is not echoed in mainstream cognitive linguistic scholarship.

Returning to the study of other languages, their worldviews and their modes of patterning and conceptual configuration, will take us back to the project which inspired Humboldt. It will take us back to that personality-forming experience that every serious language student must deal with when he or she realises for the first time that in entering another language, they are entering another conceptual cosmos in which the planets move in different revolutions. That realisation brings with it a sense of vertigo. We are forced to abandon our own frameworks of reference. But at the same time, we begin to learn that we can never fully shake off our own culture, our own modes of world-perceiving and world-conceiving, or those idiosyncratic reflexes which form part of our own personal world. This is an exciting moment, a moment of creativity.

Will cognitive linguistics make a contribution to the comparison of languages? Will it allow us to explore discourse and creativity? Will it help us explain culture? Will mainstream cognitive linguists be able to listen to attempts in other countries, in other language-cultures to refashion and reformulate some of the fundamental concepts with which they are working? The answer to that question will depend to a large extent on whether cognitive linguists are able to hear something of what Humboldt had to say.

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HUMBOLDT'S CHALLENGE TO COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS:  
A FEW BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON THE LINGUISTIC PATTERNING OF TRUTH  
IN CZECH, FRENCH, ENGLISH AND GERMAN

The article is mainly concerned with methodological issues; the author concentrates on problems relating to the notion of *worldview*, especially when applied to linguistic research, pointing to the term's vagueness, as it denotes both an individual conceptualization of the world and judgments entrenched in culture. He claims that in Great Britain and in America the familiarity with Wilhelm von Humboldt's conception is insufficient. What frequently escapes the attention of researchers referring to Humboldt is the opposition *Ergon* – *Energeia*. Despite the fact that the terms are used in various publications, British and American linguistics does not capitalize on them and as a result studies language as an "object" rather than an exchange between communicating subjects. For Humboldt, language is not so much a "thing" as a faculty used by humans to understand the world. It is "objective" only in the sense of being super-individual: speakers share and negotiate meanings.

The article also relates to the discussion on the so called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which has recently seen the emergence of two opposing camps: "the defenders of diversity" and "the

defenders of the psychic unity of humankind". A representative of the latter is Steven Pinker, whose ideas are criticized here as based on wrong assumptions of universal concepts (which in fact are typical of English) and omitting comparative research. The origin of this approach is sought in Noam Chomsky's "transcendental scientific idealism". On the other hand, empirical comparative research on universals conducted by Anna Wierzbicka is appreciated.

The article also deals with the conception of linguistic determinism and its place in linguistics. The conception plays a limited role in Humboldt's theory, who stresses the creativity of speakers and for whom language, thanks to the workings of the mind (*Geist*), can blaze new conceptual trails. The article also points to the insufficient reception of the thought of Edward Sapir: in today's renaissance of linguistic anthropology, especially in the USA, Sapir's views on creativity, subjectivity and individuality in shaping the language system by its users have largely been overlooked. If American and many other English-speaking linguists rarely relate to Sapir's work in any detailed manner, it is very much alive in Polish ethnolinguistics (Bartmiński, Wierzbicka).

The article also deals with contemporary cognitive linguistics, pointing out that the second generation of cognitive linguists often falls into the trap of "linguistics without language", for the now predominant paradigm incites one to practice the bad method of studying relations between words and concepts in the English-based linguistic worldview and to accept *a priori* the universal nature of the conceptualizations within it. However, cognitive-inspired comparative research is noted as valuable, especially in the domain of metaphorization (in Prague or Lublin) – but such research is surprisingly infrequent in English-speaking countries.

In the analytical part, the author comments on the concept of TRUTH in Czech, French, English and German, with special attention to the differences between them. He notes the distinction between the English *truth* and the Czech *pravda*, identifiable in semantic, morphological and phonetic links between this Czech word and other words, such as *opravdový*, *spravedlivý*, *právo*, i.e. lexemes relating to justice, the legal system and integrity. He also points to the differences between the English *truth* and the German *Wahr*, as well as different etymological relations of *truth* in comparison with the French *vrai* (from which *vraisemblable* is derived), translated into English as *likely*. Another problem is that of the semantics of grammatical gender: the author asks why French *vérité*, German *Wahrheit* and Czech *pravda* are feminine. In his divagations on the influence of gender on our intellectual life he refers to Voltaire and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as the literary output of Fénelon, with the light it casts on the femininity of *vérité*. He also invokes the poetry of František Halas, who uses the Latin word *luna* because its Czech counterpart, *měsíc*, is masculine – a manifestation of the Romantic feminization of nature. The creative dimension of communication, visible in literature, is not restricted, in the author's opinion, to one style; on the contrary, communicating in language involves negotiations between tradition and innovation, between culture and individuality, and finally between the minds of interlocutors. How to account for these mechanisms is a challenge for linguists.