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I

If language is the “stuff of thought,” to quote the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker,¹⁾ do speakers of different languages think differently? Are there distinct habits of thought and feeling that correspond to English and Japanese, for example? Do speakers of different languages view the natural, social, and spiritual worlds with different lenses? If each language encloses its speakers in a separate mental universe, how are translation and communication across cultures even possible? Maybe language faculties are universal and do not vary. If that’s the case, can we then study languages to discover the mechanisms of mind common to all humanity?

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the German linguist, diplomat, and educational reformer, made these questions central to inquiry in the human sciences. He used language as a tool to study the human mind and interpret human cultural difference. Living from 1767 to 1835, he was a contemporary of the philosophers Kant and Hegel, a friend to the literary giants Goethe and Schiller, and, with his brother Alexander von Humboldt, one of the most influential intellectuals of the early nineteenth century.

Recognized as a major linguistic theorist by Noam Chomsky²⁾ among others, Wilhelm von Humboldt was also a tireless empirical researcher. At a time when Europe’s colonial expansion made systematic knowledge of the world’s languages possible for the first time, he stood at the center of a community of researchers who studied language and culture on a truly global scale. From the early 1800s until his death in 1835, Humboldt used his connections as a statesman and as a gentleman to construct a vast correspondence network bringing him information from missionaries, merchants, diplomats, colonial administrators, explorers, and fellow scholars on six continents.³⁾ He collected word lists in Quechua, studied grammars in Sanskrit, pored over epics in Javanese, scrutinized Bible passages in Malagasy, and exchanged letters with experts on Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese characters. And what of Japanese? Sitting in Germany, he relied in part on a grammar imported from Mexico, the work of a disappointed Jesuit missionary who had moved there after being shut out by the exclusion policy (*sakoku*).⁴⁾

Humboldt surrounded himself with all these materials at a simple wooden desk in his mansion in suburban Berlin. In a room filled with Greek statues and painted green to stimulate the intellect, he undertook a voyage of the imagination just as ambitious as the real travels of his brother

Alexander. Alexander's voyages as a naturalist and a scientist had made him widely known as the "second discoverer of America," after Columbus. By contrast, Wilhelm never had to leave his study in order to track native Americans from New England to the Andes Mountains, or to accompany prehistoric mariners from eastern Africa to the Easter Islands, or to travel backward in time to probe the ancient wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is true that he did fieldwork among the Basques of northern Spain. And once, he queried a living Hawaiian on variant pronunciations of the word "aloha."⁵⁾ But most of his researches were solitary excursions of the mind. Whenever he encountered a new language, he extracted its cognitive architecture, its genius, what he called its "inner form." This was revealed by its grammatical system—and discoverable from within the confines of his own home.

While often solitary, however, Humboldt by no means worked alone. As a gentleman scholar, he belonged to a global network of serious amateurs like himself: educated Europeans all over the world who were bound together by the protocols of gentlemanly conduct and correspondence. In addition, as an architect of the first research university, the University of Berlin, Humboldt also patronized a new and different species of professional scholar. These men were employed in universities and academies and increasingly made their careers by focusing on research in a specialized academic discipline.

Humboldt occupied a brief, fascinating moment in world history just before the globalization of knowledge was reshaped by the professionalization of scholarship. By that, I mean that at the moment Europeans had begun to achieve a knowledge of the entire world—its languages, landscapes, and cultures—their pursuit of that knowledge fragmented into a series of different and sometimes rival disciplines. At the University of Berlin, and at its later imitators from Boston to Beijing, the disciplines Humboldt straddled began to grow apart—linguistics and literature, classics and anthropology, history and philosophy. The central irony of Humboldt's work was that its comprehensive ambition doomed it to misunderstanding by the professional scholarly communities that he helped to bring into being.

Today, then, I would like to explore how the world's languages were studied before the rise of academic disciplines changed the conditions of knowledge production. I will focus on a single case study: Humboldt's demonstration that a great family of languages, now known as the Austronesian family, dominates the oceans south of Asia. I will explain how other gentleman scholars pioneered this subject, why Humboldt came to it himself, what he discovered, and how his discoveries were misconstrued by some of the same professional scholars he patronized.

This exercise shows just how much was lost at the inception of the system of academic disciplines that we still live with today: a loss both in the global breadth and ambition of scholarly projects, and in the ability of non-professionals to participate in the production of knowledge about the world and its cultures. If we are to answer the questions with which I opened this lecture, perhaps Humboldt's project, with its global breadth and ambition, offers a way to recoup that loss and move forward.

II

The Austronesian language family is the world's second largest by geographical range and includes more individual members than any other language family on earth, perhaps one fifth of the roughly 6,000 languages that human beings speak. Of these, Javanese, Tagalog, and Malay count the most speakers in modern times, with large populations clustered in present-day Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Already in prehistoric times, however, speakers of Austronesian languages had spread as far west as Madagascar and as far east as Easter Island. Through staggering feats of seamanship, these ancient mariners colonized most of the tropical ocean world from Africa east to the Americas. Today's linguists have identified Taiwan as the family's ancestral homeland.⁶⁾ Nine of its ten branches are confined to Taiwan alone, among the aboriginal tongues that pre-date Chinese colonization in the 1600s. All the others—over 1,100 languages in total—derive from the tenth branch, called the Malayo-Polynesian.⁷⁾ Its speakers first left Taiwan several thousand years ago and migrated island by island over the Indian and Pacific Oceans, finally reaching Hawaii around 500 AD.

These details were unknown during Humboldt's time. But the age of European expansion had called forth a series of gentleman scholars with the global range and native curiosity to start putting the pieces together. Already in the 1600s, Dutch explorers began to notice similarities among languages widely dispersed over the southern oceans. Then, in 1782, the British East India Company official William Marsden demonstrated that these similarities could not be ascribed to chance. Marsden tabulated lists of common words with similar pronunciations in different languages, like *aheetoo* in Tahitian and *pheetoo* in Malagasy, both meaning "seven."⁸⁾

Word comparison was a primary means of studying language relationships until the early 1800s because it was simple to perform using the rudimentary dictionaries then available. Only in later decades, as we will see, did scholars compare grammatical structures to rule out premature conclusions based on coincidental similarities in vocabulary. Analyses of grammar were also later used to construct family trees of languages going backwards in time to a common source. Lacking such tools, Marsden could only speculate on the origin of Malayo-Polynesian. Central Asia seemed to him the most likely candidate, if only because it was thought to be the great "cradle of nations."⁹⁾

Marsden's early work on Malayo-Polynesian appeared just four years before another gentleman scholar identified a second great language family. In 1786, the East India Company official and Calcutta judge William Jones famously noted striking similarities among the ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Persian, Celtic, and Gothic languages, and by extension all of their descendants. What we now call the Indo-European language family stretches from India to Ireland and beyond, to all of Europe's overseas colonies. It is the world's largest by both population and geography. Growing from Jones' discovery, research on Indo-European fueled the rise of linguistics as an academic discipline, particularly in Germany. There, it also inspired many *undisciplined* speculations on the origins and special genius of the Indo-European or "Aryan" race.

The near-simultaneous discovery of two great language families in the 1780s raised the question of how they might be related, and it was Humboldt who solved that problem fifty years later in a great unfinished work. In the interim, yet another East India Company official, John Crawfurd, offered the most intriguing theory of how the Malayo-Polynesian languages had come to be related in the first place. Crawfurd was a physician, later a colonial administrator, whose globetrotting career repeatedly sent him back and forth between Britain and its Indian Ocean colonies. His three-volume *History of the Indian Archipelago*, published in 1820, belongs to a recognizable genre of interdisciplinary cultural history.¹⁰ Like Marsden's own *History of Sumatra*, published some decades earlier,¹¹ Crawfurd's work treated language and literature alongside history, technology, religion, society, and other subjects. In the literature of Indonesia he saw nothing but "bombast, puerility, and utter inanity...the very stammering of infancy."¹² Such bias was typical of European gentleman scholars. But Crawfurd did take a more favorable view of the languages themselves. Here he conceded that the spread of civilization could be tracked through a simple mechanism: the migration of words.

Crawfurd did *not* ascribe to the Malayo-Polynesian peoples a single ethnic or linguistic origin. Rather, he conjectured that in prehistoric times, isolated Indonesian tribes had developed their own languages, each with a crude vocabulary. Only later did one regional tribe—which he located in Java—raise itself to a level of civilization enabling it to dominate its neighbors through a mixture of conquest and peaceful contact. Their old Javanese language, which Crawfurd dubbed "Great Polynesian," then infused those of its neighbors with concepts signalling a superior technology and capacity for mental abstraction, through words for numbers, plants, animals, and metals. The spread of Great Polynesian accounted for all the similarities scholars had noted since Marsden. In due course, further waves of outside influence brought new and still more sophisticated words to the region: abstract nouns and mythology from Sanskrit, religious and legal terms from Arabic, and commercial and scientific concepts from Portuguese, Dutch, and English.¹³

Humboldt had little use for Crawfurd's theory since it centered on the spread of words, equated words with concepts, and neglected deeper grammatical relationships. But Crawfurd's portrait of Indonesia's ethnic complexity did entice Humboldt to spend his last years studying its languages.

First, however, I want to summarize what the gentleman scholars who studied this region can tell us about the globalization of knowledge more generally. Marsden, Jones, Crawfurd: scholars like these proved impressively broad but ultimately superficial in their capacity to grasp the world's linguistic diversity. Each enjoyed a privileged ability to cross back and forth between scholarship and official duties. This widened the circle of those able to produce knowledge and vastly multiplied the sources from which it was derived. Yet these nonprofessional scholars never fully escaped the utilitarian aims of the projects they really served. They acquired languages in order to colonize, control, and convert non-Europeans, not because they were dedicated to the study of language itself. Turning now to Humboldt, we begin to glimpse how Europe's global reach could

also sustain scholarship undertaken for its own sake.

III

Humboldt came to the study of the Malayo-Polynesian languages through a route quite different from those with personal ties to the region. Languages were central to European diplomacy and international relations during this age of global revolutions and warfare. As a happy side effect, this stimulated purely academic endeavors in the political centers of Europe and North America. Humboldt himself served as an ambassador in Rome, Vienna, and London and in each place he made personal contact with experts on various world languages. Thanks to their help, Humboldt was able, in effect, to survey the entire globe in the 1810s and 1820s. Region by region, he evaluated languages by their ability to facilitate clear thought and creative expression. At the end of this process, the Malayo-Polynesian realm loomed as the largest unfilled space on his imaginary map, and as a test case for his broader theories of mind.

Dominating Humboldt's map were the Indo-European languages. These were also known as the Sanskrit family on the theory that the sacred language of ancient India was in fact the source from which Greek, Latin, German, and all the rest were derived.¹⁴⁾

Humboldt first took up Sanskrit in the late 1810s when he lived in London—a center of study owing to Britain's control over India. He mastered its grammar and literary masterpieces through close contact with two fellow Germans, Franz Bopp, also in London, and A.W. Schlegel, active in Paris, whom he personally helped recruit to professorships back in Germany.¹⁵⁾ These men were part of a whole generation that swooned for Sanskrit. But Humboldt rejected the notion, favored by Schlegel's brother Friedrich, that Sanskrit was a language given by God to the early Indo-Europeans,¹⁶⁾ and he certainly did not believe it to be the indicator of a deeper Aryan racial superiority. Humboldt never viewed linguistics as a method to reconstruct a primeval culture from which to renew Western civilization or awaken the German nation.¹⁷⁾ But he did follow most linguists in regarding the Indo-European languages as superior by virtue of their inflectional grammar.

In inflected languages, nouns and verbs change their sounds internally to indicate such qualities as singular or plural, subject or object, masculine or feminine, past or present, etc. To Humboldt, the rules of inflection governing Indo-European languages give their speakers an unusual mental agility and spontaneity: an ability, built into the language itself, to construct complex webs of ideas in a torrent of speech. This is because a precise inflected form is always close at hand to give each word its proper meaning and clarify its grammatical relation to other words in a sentence. Inflection unburdened the mind from having to guess meaning from context and supposition. It also freed the mind to take flight by supporting the most imaginative expressions in a firm grammatical structure.¹⁸⁾

Central to Humboldt's theory of mind was the belief that the most perfect languages impose

what he called “form” on the raw matter of spoken utterance. Inflection helps give form to matter. Verbs in particular, as words of action and vigor, must be properly distinguished from nouns, which are more inert, and this is something that inflectional rules do especially well in Indo-European languages, according to Humboldt.¹⁹⁾

Had he remained confined to the orbit of Indo-European, Humboldt might have done little to distinguish himself as a linguist. But as early as 1799, a pioneering trip to the Basque region of northern Spain had awakened in him a novel fascination with “barbarian” tongues—those lacking a classical tradition, a written literature, or any relation to Indo-European. This fascination, and the deep engagement it implied with illiterate, seemingly uncivilized peoples, distinguished Humboldt from many other serious linguists of his time. It later carried his research to North and South America, whose native tongues offered a bevy of “barbarian” languages isolated from all others on earth.

Humboldt’s study of the American languages was made possible by the Papal Librarian in Rome, Lorenzo Hervás y Panduro, who had assembled a vast archive from Catholic missionaries who had returned to Europe after the suppression of the Jesuit order in the 1770s.²⁰⁾ Hervás supplied Humboldt with a trove of grammars and dictionaries while he served as Prussian ambassador to the Vatican from 1803 to 1808. Materials his brother brought back from his Latin American adventures supplemented this archive, as did Wilhelm’s own web of correspondents. Access to this additional material enabled Humboldt to free the study of native American languages from the categories and assumptions of the missionaries, raised on Latin grammar, who had first studied them. He became the first person to analyze their grammatical structures on their own terms.

Humboldt assigned the American languages to a different category, inferior to inflection, traditionally termed “agglutinating.” Agglutinating languages form words by compounding words and word fragments together, instead of modifying word sounds internally to indicate fine grammatical distinctions. This compounding or agglutinating principle posed an obstacle to the mental agility and precision possible in inflected languages because it lumps together concepts that speech ought to keep separate.

Humboldt’s negative judgment invited the critique of European-American linguists who had themselves been inspired by his fieldwork on Basque to undertake their own studies of local Indian languages. Peter Stephen DuPonceau, the Philadelphia lawyer and American Philosophical Society president, defended the virtues of Native American languages for their ability to cluster and reshuffle word fragments in brilliantly imaginative ways. To DuPonceau, a word like *kuligatschis*, which means “give me your pretty little cat’s paw” in the Delaware language, compressed an entire sentence’s worth of meaning into a single evocative word.²¹⁾ To Humboldt, such agglutinated words, however charming they may be, could never quite produce the clarity and precision of mind found in languages with more exacting rules of inner form.²²⁾

While this judgment only reiterated common European biases about native Americans,

Humboldt did emphasize that any language is capable of even the most subtle and sophisticated thought. Some, like the American languages, simply do it more clumsily than others.

In the Chinese language, Humboldt encountered a third general type: an isolating language. Chinese neither inflected word sounds to indicate grammatical relationships, nor agglutinated them to construct composite meanings. Instead it isolated each idea in an unmodifiable word, leaving only the order of words to indicate how individual ideas are related to one another. Given its extreme simplicity of form, Chinese ought to have been counted the world's most primitive language by Humboldt's logic. But here he confronted one of the world's oldest and richest literary and philosophical traditions, one whose linguistic achievements he could not deny.

An exchange of letters with Europe's foremost Sinologist, Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, forced him to revise his views.²³⁾ Abel-Rémusat was a founder of the Asiatic Society in Paris who belonged to a long tradition of European intellectuals counting China among the world's most enlightened societies. A man who had taught himself Chinese from a text on herbal medicine, Abel-Rémusat was a linguist to be reckoned with.

Responding to Abel-Rémusat, Humboldt now praised Chinese as a language of great sophistication precisely *because* each word denoted an inviolable idea. Whereas in inflected languages, copious sound markers unburdened the mind, the absence of such markers in Chinese forced the mind to meditate and reflect upon how individual words add up to meaningful and complex thoughts. Thinking in Chinese might be less agile and less precise than in inflected languages but it was more abstract, more profound, and more congenial to multiple interpretations. It was a language, in short, of pure ideas.²⁴⁾

How had it become that way? Humboldt speculated that the absence of inflection in Chinese grew from its limited repertoire of available sounds. This phonic poverty was in turn a consequence of the historical unity and stability of the Chinese population. Over the centuries, China had been spared the migration of peoples and the mixing of languages that would have enriched its sound repertoire.²⁵⁾ Normally Humboldt prized cultural hybridity, but here conceded that the Chinese had made their isolation into a virtue. The language itself had contributed to the historical unity and stability of Chinese culture over time.

From inflected to agglutinating to isolating, each language type, Humboldt felt, promoted distinct habits of thought and expression in its speakers. All that remained for him was to refine this system by applying it to a new set of test cases. Needed was a group of languages midway between the extremes of Chinese and Indo-European, but not cut off from all the rest like those of the Americas. The Malayo-Polynesian languages stood at a global crossroads of cultural mixture and migration. Already well-known but only half-studied, they fit the bill perfectly.

IV

Humboldt's contributions to the study of Malayo-Polynesian can quickly be summarized. First

he produced an interdisciplinary cultural history of India's influence on Indonesia. In it, he treated the Sanskrit and Pali languages, the Hindu and Buddhist religions, and various aspects of Indian literature, mythology, and monumental architecture. Second, Humboldt focused in on Kawi, the poetic language of medieval Java. Despite borrowing massive numbers of words from Sanskrit, Kawi retained a grammatical structure independent of Indo-European. It therefore belonged to a separate Malayo-Polynesian language family. Third, Humboldt compared the grammars of a great number of other Malayo-Polynesian tongues to prove their family relation. This proof filled hundreds of pages with painstaking analyses of verbs, nouns, pronouns, and number words in Malagasy, Malaysian, Javanese, Buginese, Tongan, Tagalog, Maori, Tahitian, and Hawaiian. Incidentally, Humboldt neglected to include Taiwanese, even though its connection to Malayo-Polynesian had already been suggested by a scholar whom he knew well enough to secure a professorship.²⁶⁾

This huge enterprise raises a number of intriguing questions. How do you go about learning a language whose speakers live half a world away, a language for which there is perhaps no complete dictionary, no grammar, and little written evidence, even at its source? Assuming you can overcome that obstacle, how do you then reconstruct family relations among different languages, not only in the present day, but hundreds of years in the past? Finally, how do you reach conclusions about the habits of thought and feeling characteristic of a given language or language family?

These were the challenges that Humboldt set himself, challenges that his predecessors had never faced. Gentleman scholars like Marsden and Crawford enjoyed firsthand access to oceanic languages but had only offered speculative and superficial theories on them. Academic experts on Chinese and Sanskrit had deeper, methodical knowledge of grammar and literature but relied passively on texts imported into European libraries from some of the most highly literate cultures of Asia. To study Malayo-Polynesian, Humboldt would have to use his correspondence network in a way no one had ever done before.

Take Malagasy, for example, the language of Madagascar and the larger family's westernmost outlier—a crucial case. Humboldt began his study of the language using excerpts from the Christian Gospel of Matthew translated for the conversion of Madagascar natives. As was typical, it took a lot of effort just to get hold of the text. A British diplomat Humboldt knew in London had acquired it from a colleague in Mauritius. He then sent it to Berlin through Humboldt's son-in-law and successor as Prussian ambassador in London.²⁷⁾ Humboldt then read and re-read the gospel in Malagasy until he noticed patterns—certain word suffixes, for example, that seemed to indicate the passive voice.²⁸⁾ Committing his suppositions to paper, he sent a raft of questions to a Protestant missionary back in Madagascar, Joseph John Freeman. After more than a year's delay, Freeman replied with detailed answers and a profuse apology for not having done so sooner. "I am anxious to exonerate myself from the charge or even the appearance of neglect," Freeman protested in his defense.²⁹⁾ Such were the lengths that an isolated, overworked missionary would go to purely on the basis of an unsolicited letter from a remote German baron. Freeman of course had only the

merest glimmer of what larger philosophical project motivated Humboldt's highly technical inquiries. But strict codes of gentlemanly politeness bound him to answer a man he never met, and never would.

Turning to Kawi—the Sanskrit/Javanese hybrid at the core of his work—Humboldt not only taught himself another language from afar. He also reconstructed its family history going back centuries, almost to its origin. At the core of his treatment of Kawi was an analysis of the Javanese national epic, the *Brata Yudha*, which dates from medieval times. Anyone who knows the first thing about the poem—that it narrates a colossal war between two families and features a character named Krishna—sees that it is clearly derived from the giant Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*. It therefore seemed to show that Java's medieval language was likewise derived from India, just as John Crawfurd had suggested in this theory of word transmission. No one in Europe had a complete copy of the poem, however, and in Humboldt's time only a single living person, a Javanese prince, was reported to possess full mastery of the Kawi language.³⁰ So Humboldt turned to Crawfurd, who by the early 1830s had spent a decade away from the subject but now eagerly offered his assistance in procuring him more texts on Kawi.³¹ With these materials now before him, Humboldt could now systematically analyze the many Sanskrit loan words found in the *Brata Yudha*. This procedure showed that the loan words were treated not according to Sanskrit rules but those of a separate grammatical system—Kawi's own system, which resembled those of the other Malayo-Polynesian languages. This confirmed the independence of that family even at its point of most intense historical contact with Indo-European.³²

Among Humboldt's most impressive feats was the ability to discover rules of language that governed the mental habits of native speakers without their even knowing it. His study of the Javanese verb is a good example. The year 1831 saw Humboldt querying a series of Dutch missionaries on the way certain Javanese verbs could be converted into nouns.³³ One such missionary had observed that this was done by modifying an initial consonant. Thus "neda," eat, could become "teda," food. However, Humboldt showed that, historically, it had been the other way around, that the verbs originally came from the nouns, that "teda" had become "neda." He reasoned that since the verbs all begin with nasal consonants—like *n* and *m*—they must be the derived forms, not the original ones.³⁴ A linguistic rule designated a certain class of consonants to make verbs out of nouns, and this rule operated subconsciously in the minds of Javanese speakers.

By showing that Malayo-Polynesian languages more often used nouns as roots, whereas Indo-European languages more often used verbs, Humboldt found another point of distinction between the two families, and one that highlighted a deeper cognitive difference. Malayo-Polynesian languages, to him, lacked the full vigor and mental energy that comes from having verbs as word roots clearly distinct from nouns. They neither achieve the inflectional precision and vitality of Indo-European languages, nor, "like Chinese, reject grammatical formation with scornful resignation." Instead, they promiscuously intermingle noun and verb forms in "wondrous" and "one-sided" fashion.³⁵ The Malayo-Polynesian languages thus occupied a middle position between the two

extremes of inflection and isolation. This located them alongside the American languages, which were likewise imperfectly systematic, in the typology he had constructed. Yet the point here, as ever, was less to assert hierarchy than to map human linguistic and cultural diversity in all of its manifestations.

These examples only scratch the surface of Humboldt's work habits. I have yet to recapture the blend of imagination and methodical discipline that allowed him to stare at foreign texts, day after day, until patterns of inflection and agglutination danced before his eyes and he glimpsed the rules that gave each language its inner form. What I can say, however, is that he had managed to combine the best of what both gentleman scholars in far-flung colonies and academic linguists working back in Europe had been able to achieve separately. Almost uniquely among his contemporaries, Humboldt reconciled the tension between global breadth and scholarly depth—but only for a brief moment. As we will now see, his achievements were incomplete and fragile, misunderstood by the very group one would have expected to appreciate them most.

V

"I have a sad and serious duty to perform," Alexander von Humboldt wrote in the foreword to his brother's incomplete masterwork. Billed as a study of the Kawi language, its subtitle announced a larger ambition: "On the Diversity of Human Language Structure and Its Influence on the Cultural Development of the Human Race."³⁶ But Wilhelm had died before he could bring the mammoth book to completion. A difficult writer, reluctant to publish, he was afflicted with a ponderous, turgid writing style: he was a master of many tongues but unable to express himself clearly in any one of them. Of the three volumes planned for the *Kawi-Werk*—over 1,700 pages in total—only the publication of volume one was supervised by Humboldt himself. The rest of the posthumous publication was left to Wilhelm's secretary, Eduard Buschmann, himself an accomplished linguist.

Beyond its troubled editorial history, the *Kawi-Werk* faced an even greater obstacle in the noncomprehension of one of Germany's most distinguished professional linguists, Franz Bopp, now regarded as a founder of the discipline. Bopp, as we saw before, had met Humboldt in London in 1818 where he personally tutored him in Sanskrit. They resumed their relationship after Humboldt engineered Bopp's appointment in 1821 to a professorship at the University of Berlin.

Languages—especially ancient Greek and Latin—formed the centerpiece of German education, in part thanks to Humboldt's own educational reforms. With Bopp's generation, German universities moved decisively beyond Western classical languages to the comparative study of world languages and cultures more generally. But such changes were controversial and always needed aggressive defense by men like Bopp.

Just months after the third and final volume of Humboldt's *Kawi-Werk* appeared in print, Bopp offered his own analysis of the Malayo-Polynesian family, styling it as a daughter of Indo-European

and citing Humboldt himself as an authority in the very act of denying Humboldt's own conclusions. Bopp stated—without proof—that the Malayo-Polynesian languages had arisen from the ruins of Sanskrit after its transplantation to Indonesia, just as the Romance languages—Italian, French, Spanish, etc.—had arisen from the ruins of Latin in Western Europe.³⁷⁾ Yet the decadence of the Malayo-Polynesian family was much greater than that of Romance languages, to the extent that the entire grammatical structure of the parent language had been lost. What Humboldt had proven to be a separate grammatical system in Malayo-Polynesian, Bopp regarded as no system at all. For this reason, only comparisons of words could be relied upon to prove the derivation of the daughter family. Through this maneuver Bopp exempted himself from applying the very linguistic methods that had secured his own reputation. Virtually all serious linguists regarded grammatical comparison as indispensable, for the reason that a clever scholar can take almost any pair of languages and find words in them that sound similar whether they are historically related or not. Bopp's works comparing a whole series of Indo-European languages had all been built on precisely this kind of grammatical analysis.³⁸⁾

Now, however, Bopp set aside this approach in order to annex the vastness of Malayo-Polynesian to his own, already vast, Indo-European project. By applying suppositions based on the laws of sound modification to a series of everyday words, Bopp suggested that many of these words in Malayo-Polynesian languages had Sanskrit roots. Thus, in a typically brazen assertion, Bopp traced both the Irish word *lamh* and the Hawaiian word *lima*, both meaning "fire," to the same Sanskrit root *lab*.³⁹⁾ Had he applied the same procedure with, for example, Irish and Bengali, Bopp might have been on safe ground, of course. The stunning discovery that the languages of northwestern Europe and eastern India were derived from the same original source had been an inspiration for scholars ever since William Jones back in 1786. And yet Humboldt had been at pains to puncture their enthusiasm and treat the languages of the ocean world on their own terms. Bopp did not dream of rehabilitating the ancient Aryans any more than Humboldt did. Instead, it was for professional reasons that he continually strove to extend his personal academic fiefdom as far as possible. Humboldt, as a nonprofessional gentleman scholar, had no need to cultivate a competitive streak.

Bopp's prestige—and the cleverness of his own misreadings—set the tone for further reviews.⁴⁰⁾ In 1841 the Berlin geography professor August Zeune, a scholar of human racial history, echoed Bopp, word for word in places, in a laudatory review of the *Kawi-Werk*.⁴¹⁾ He thereby helped to cement among professional scholars the incorrect idea that Humboldt himself had derived the Malayo-Polynesian languages from the Indo-European. At this point Buschmann, Humboldt's secretary, could stomach the indignity no further. In print, he accused Bopp of an "all-encompassing addiction to Sanskrit" and of deliberately misconstruing the dead man they both revered, to advance his own scholarly agenda.⁴²⁾ Bopp replied in a passive-aggressive tour de force that it was in fact Buschmann who was motivated by a pathological desire to keep both Humboldt's legacy and the Malayo-Polynesian language family for himself—deriving his research agenda from

Humboldt since he was insufficiently creative to strike out on his own. Amazingly, Bopp's psychologizing counterattack on Buschmann took the form, not of a critique of Buschmann himself, but of a "self-review" of his own work, which Bopp justified as an attempt to save his original conclusions from Buschmann's partisan accusations.⁴³⁾

Bopp's lapse is again ironic because it was he, as much as any other contemporary linguist, who upheld the primacy of methodological rigor in order to cordon off linguistics from the study of literature, history, culture, aesthetics, and philosophy. His behavior illustrates the kind of scholarly self-promotion and professional rivalry endemic to the age of specialized academic disciplines. A generational, cultural, and institutional gulf separated Bopp and Buschmann from Humboldt and his correspondents—men like Marsden, Crawford, and Freeman. Gentleman scholars of an earlier generation had communicated in the most polite and deferential tones, in part because, in order to elicit information from a lonely colleague half a world away, the first priority was to avoid giving offense to that person. By no means had scholarship in that gentlemanly age been free of acrimony, rancor, and partisanship. What had changed by the 1840s was that the new breed of professional scholars made technical methodological disputes into personal disagreements, and indeed often pursued their deepest personal rivalries *through* technical methodological disputes.

Did Humboldt's work fall prey to neglect and misunderstanding because he wrote badly, published reluctantly, chose an obscure and difficult subject, and died before being able to complete his life's work? Undoubtedly these factors played key roles. One has only to look at his brother Alexander, whose South American voyages inaugurated a glittering career, to appreciate what difference a clear style, compelling discoveries, ample publications, and an extremely long life could make. Still, Wilhelm's liabilities did not prevent other, later linguists, those whose writing was just as technical, challenging, and obscure, from attaining lasting success, least of all in Germany. Among all the disciplines, from classics to chemistry, in which nineteenth-century Germans surpassed their much wealthier contemporaries in France and Britain, perhaps nowhere is their success more telling than in linguistics. In linguistics, German methods of studying foreign cultures yielded greater scholarly returns than was the case in countries that actually possessed foreign colonies. That German scholars too wrote dense and difficult works became a point of pride, not a limitation. Their neglect of Humboldt had less to do with what he wrote than with what linguistics itself became.

VI

Linguistics in our own times has become a highly technical discipline whose methods and conclusions are often opaque to outsiders. It stands closer to the natural sciences than to the humanities in the way it accumulates data, tests hypotheses, and aims at reproducible, testable conclusions. This too is a legacy of Humboldt—the Humboldt that Chomsky read, a Humboldt today known only through his theoretical writings, a Humboldt shorn of all his wider empirical

engagement with cultural and historical context, aesthetic and moral judgment, and the intellectual, philosophical, and literary achievements of the world's many language communities. Notably absent in contemporary academia is the all-encompassing vision and globe-encircling ambition that Humboldt dedicated his life's work to cultivating. Today, the questions that drove him are dispersed among a dozen subfields. Linguistics especially exists in a self-imposed isolation radically cut off from all the other disciplines of language and culture. We need to correct that situation.

I do not propose that we simply go back and pick up Humboldt's research agenda where he left it off. Humboldt did discover many rules about how language operates in the mind. But his most sweeping conjectures—about the alleged cognitive superiority of inflected languages, for example—are quaint at best, and offensive at worst. Such conjectures have been pretty well disproven by a century and a half of linguistic research, even if a milder version of the idea that different languages “think” differently has recently been revived by some cognitive scientists.⁴⁴⁾

Instead, our very distance from Humboldt's project makes it worthy of careful reconstruction today. When we are able to rebuild the intellectual edifice that lurks among the ruins of Humboldt's published works and unpublished manuscripts, when we can scrutinize it from all sides and understand its architectural supports, when we can visit the individual rooms where he housed his knowledge of the world's languages and cultures, we will be able to appreciate his craftsmanship even while acknowledging his biases.

The payoff will be an ability to see the entire world from an unconventional perspective—that of its languages, which in Humboldt's time were a window into culture and the mind themselves. The world of disciplinary specialization we have inherited from Humboldt's intellectual children has lost the openness, fluidity, global range, and appetite for big questions that were all still possible for Humboldt himself. Humboldt's project should serve as an inspiration for us to regain those qualities. Today, the humanistic disciplines all vie in their own particular ways to unravel the mysteries of language, culture, and the mind, but without ever converging on a common understanding. This makes them increasingly unable to confront their most urgent present-day challenges: the ongoing fragmentation of scholarly inquiry, the disruptive effect of globalization on the cultural hegemony of the West, and the threatening moves by some cognitive scientists to assume from humanistic scholars the right to explain human nature. Despite all the biases and blind spots of Humboldt's age, these challenges offer us good reason to think that we suffer from other biases perhaps just as great. Careful attention to his intellectual world can at least help us to recognize and correct what is imperfect about our own.

Notes

- 1) Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window Into Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2007).
- 2) Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 [originally 1966]).
- 3) Humboldt's empirical research on the world's languages has been comprehensively documented by Kurt

- Mueller-Vollmer, who rediscovered his personal papers (*Nachlaß*) on linguistics after their dispersion during World War II. See especially his *Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachwissenschaft. Ein kommentiertes Verzeichnis des sprachwissenschaftlichen Nachlasses* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1993). Also see Georg Reutter, *Kosmos der Sprachen: Wilhelm von Humboldts linguistisches System* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2011) for copious information on Humboldt's network of contacts and sources.
- 4) Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Notice d'une grammaire Japonaise imprimée a Mexico" (1825) in *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Albert Leitzmann, vol. 5, 1823-1826 (Berlin: B. Behr's Verlag, 1906), 237-47.
 - 5) "Nach mündlicher Vernehmung einer aus Owaihi mit dem Mentor gekommenen jungen Menschen," n.d., Coll. ling. fol. 34, Bl. 25-27, *Nachlaß Wilhelm von Humboldt*, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Cracow (hereafter: Humboldt Papers). I am indebted to Dr. Ute Tintemann of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences for access to scans of Humboldt's papers in Berlin as part of an ongoing digitization project.
 - 6) Jared Diamond, "Taiwan's Gift to the World," *Nature* 403 (17 February 2000): 709-10; K. Alexander Adelaar and Nikolaus P. Himmelmann (eds.), *The Austronesian Languages of Asia and Madagascar* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1, 6-7, 26-29; and the foundational article by Robert Blust, "Subgrouping, circularity and extinction: some issues in Austronesian comparative linguistics," in *Selected Papers from the Eighth International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics*, ed. Elizabeth Zeitoun and Paul Jen Kuei Li (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1999), 31-94.
 - 7) Humboldt is often mistakenly credited with coining the term "Malayo-Polynesian." Instead he generally used the term "Malayan" to refer to this group of languages. Reflecting current (as well as later nineteenth-century) usage, however, I will consistently use the term "Malayo-Polynesian."
 - 8) William Marsden, "Remarks on the Sumatran Languages, by Mr. Marsden. In a Letter to Sir Joseph Banks, Bart. President of the Royal Society," *Archaeologia: Or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity* 6 (1782): 154-58.
 - 9) Marsden, "Remarks," 154-55.
 - 10) John Crawfurd, *History of the Indian Archipelago: Containing an Account of the Manners, Arts, Languages, Religions, Institutions, and Commerce of its Inhabitants* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1820).
 - 11) William Marsden, *History of Sumatra, Containing an Account of the Government, Laws, Customs, and Manners of the Native Inhabitants, with a Description of the Natural Productions, and a Relation of the Ancient Political State of that Island* (London: n.p., 1783). This book went through several editions, including one in 1811 that Humboldt owned and used.
 - 12) Crawfurd, *History*, 2:21; cf. 2:7-9.
 - 13) See Crawfurd, *History*, 2: 15, 43-46, 78-86, 94-108 on his theory of language.
 - 14) As with the term "Malayo-Polynesian" (see note 7 above), I will use the modern term "Indo-European" where Humboldt used the term "Sanskritic" to refer to this language family.
 - 15) Indra Sengupta, *From Salon to Discipline: State, University, and Indology in Germany, 1821-1914* (Heidelberg: Ergon Verlag, 2005), 18-27; Salomon Lefmann, *Franz Bopp: Sein Leben und seine Wissenschaft* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1891-7), 1:79-82, 102-4; Albert Leitzmann (ed.), *Briefwechsel zwischen Wilhelm von Humboldt und August Wilhelm Schlegel* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1908), 3-5 on Humboldt's original attempt to recruit Schlegel to Berlin.
 - 16) Peter K.J. Park, "A Catholic Apologist in a Pantheistic World: New Approaches to Friedrich Schlegel," in *Sanskrit and "Orientalism": Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany, 1750-1958*, ed. Douglas T. McGetchin, Peter K.J. Park, and Damodar SarDesai (New Delhi: Manohar Press, 2004), 83-107, esp. 92. More generally, see Douglas T. McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India's Rebirth*

- in Modern Germany* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009).
- 17) Markus Meßling, "Wilhelm von Humboldt and the 'Orient': On Edward W. Said's Remarks on Humboldt's Orientalist Studies," *Language Sciences* 30 (2008): 482-98.
- 18) Here and elsewhere, I summarize and synthesize Humboldt's theoretical pronouncements, since it is often hard to locate specific passages amidst his sprawling and fragmented writings where his thought crystallizes. I will at least give pertinent references to Humboldt's last major treatise, the introduction to the *Kawi-Werk* described below. On inflection (as well as isolation and agglutination, also treated below), see Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, ed. Michael Lososky and trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 100-08, 202-07; and, for the original, *Über die Kawi-Sprache auf der Insel Java, nebst einer Einleitung über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1836-39), 1:CXXXV-CXLVII, CCXCV-CCCII.
- 19) Humboldt, *On Language*, 185-91; *Über die Kawi-Sprache*, 1:CCLXVII-CCLXXVI on the verb, particularly in Sanskrit.
- 20) Manuel Brea-Claramonte, "Data Collection and Data Analysis [sic] in Lorenzo Hervás: Laying the Ground for Modern Linguistic Typology," in *History of Linguistics in Spain: Historia de la lingüística en España*, ed. E.F.K. Koerner, Hans-Josef Niederehe, Antonio Quilis (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001), 265-80.
- 21) Peter Stephen DuPonceau, "Translator's Preface" to "A Grammar of the Language of the Lenni Lenape or Delaware Indians. Translated from the German Manuscript of the late Rev. David Zeisberger, by Peter Stephen DuPonceau," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 3 (1830): 65-96, esp. 77-78 for his critique of Humboldt and his view of "agglutination" and 82-83 on "*kuligatschis*."
- 22) Humboldt, *On Language*, 226-29; *Über die Kawi-Sprache*, 1:CCCXXXII-CCCXXXVIII on Delaware. Humboldt ultimately refined his view of agglutination, both blurring its differences from inflection and implying a further type (incorporating languages) exemplified by many native American tongues. See Paolo Rana, *Linguistic Typology* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987), 203-09; and Elke Nowak, "Wilhelm von Humboldt und der 'amerikanische Typus,'" in *Diskurse und Texte. Festschrift für Konrad Ehlich zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Angelika Redder (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2007), 53-64.
- 23) For Humboldt's views on Chinese, see John E. Joseph, "A Matter of *Consequenz*: Humboldt, Race, and the Genius of the Chinese Language," *Historiographia Linguistica* 26 no. 1-2 (1999): 89-148, esp. 104, 107, 120-21, and 139-41, with references to the principal primary source, Humboldt's "Lettre à Monsieur Abel-Rémusat sur la nature des formes grammaticales en général et sur la génie de la langue chinoise en particulier" (1825-26), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:254-308; Tze-wan Kwan, "Wilhelm von Humboldt on the Chinese Language—Interpretation and Reconstruction," *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 29 no. 2 (2001): 169-242.
- 24) Meßling, "Wilhelm von Humboldt," 491-93.
- 25) Joseph, "A Matter of *Consequenz*," 140-41.
- 26) Julius Klaproth, *Asia Polyglotta* (Paris: J.M. Eberhardt, 1823), 380-82. Klaproth and Abel-Rémusat collaborated closely at the Société Asiatique in Paris; the terms of Klaproth's professorship, funded by the King of Prussia, allowed him to remain in Paris. See the entry on him in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* 16 (1882): 55.
- 27) Alexander Johnston to Humboldt, 7 July 1829 and 24 July 1830, Coll. ling. fol. 53 Bl. 146-50, Humboldt Papers. The colleague in Mauritius was Charles Colville, governor of the island; Humboldt's son-in-law was

- Heinrich von Bülow, married to his daughter Gabriele.
- 28) Undated draft of Humboldt's queries for Joseph John Freeman, Coll. ling. fol. 153 Bl. 89-96, Nachlaß Johann Carl Eduard Buschmann, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz (hereafter: Buschmann Papers). Mention of passive voice comes on on Bl. 91r-92r, one among many grammatical questions treated throughout this large folder of materials on Malagasy grammar. Buschmann was Humboldt's secretary, and many of Humboldt's manuscripts on linguistics found their way into Buschmann's papers.
- 29) Joseph John Freeman to Humboldt, 2 December 1831, Coll. ling. fol. 153 Bl. 129-31, Buschmann Papers; "Antwortschreiben von Freeman auf die 'queries' Humboldts," n.d., Bl. 97-123, *ibid.*
- 30) Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1830), 1:414, and for his analysis of the *Brata Yudha*, with excerpts in English and Kawi, 1:458-524.
- 31) Crawford to Humboldt, 16 May 1831 and 28 August 1831, Coll. ling. fol. 53, Bl. 125-30, Humboldt Papers.
- 32) Humboldt, *Über die Kawi-Sprache*, 2:48-62 (on Sanskrit words in Kawi, with a clear summary statement on p. 55), 2:188-203 (on the character of Kawi in general). Cf. *On Language*, 15-20; *Über die Kawi-Sprache*, 1:VIII-XVI.
- 33) See letters from 1831-32 exchanged with Godert van der Capellen and Philippus Pieter Roorda van Eysinga in Coll. ling. fol. 53, Bl. 112-19, 207-14, 217-19, 228-33, Humboldt Papers. Van der Capellen was a diplomat Humboldt met when both participated at the Congress of Vienna, and who helped him locate Roorda van Eysinga, whom he in turn relied upon for information he used to correct the view of the Javanese verb held by Johann Friedrich Carl Gericke, a German-Dutch missionary.
- 34) W. Keith Percival, "Humboldt's Description of the Javanese Verb," in *Studies in the History of Linguistics*, ed. Dell H. Hymes (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1974), 380-89; and on the specific verb forms Percival discusses, Humboldt to Roorda van Eysinga, 31 July 1831, Coll. ling. fol. 53, Bl. 217-19, Humboldt Papers.
- 35) Humboldt, *On Language*, 191-92; *Über die Kawi-Sprache*, 1:CCLXXVI-CCLXXVIII.
- 36) This is a slightly different translation from the one adopted by Peter Heath (cf. note 18 above).
- 37) Franz Bopp, "Über die Verwandtschaft der malayisch-polynesischen Sprachen mit den indisch-europäischen," *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, philosophisch-historische Klasse* (1840): 171-246, reprinted in *Kleine Schriften zur vergleichenden Sprachwissenschaft. Gesammelte Berliner Akademieabhandlungen 1824-1854* (Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der deutschen demokratischen Republik, 1972), 235-310; cf. Humboldt, *Über die Kawi-Sprache*, 2:191, in which he clearly states that Kawi cannot be regarded as a "spoiled or degraded Sanskrit," a view not only elaborated by Bopp but also held by other scholars such as Eugène Burnouf and Christian Lassen.
- 38) Franz Bopp, *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen, und germanischen Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main: Andreäische Buchhandlung, 1816); and his subsequent multivolume work, *Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Zend, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Lithauischen, Gothischen und Deutschen* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1833-52).
- 39) Bopp, "Über die Verwandtschaft," 188-89 (original pagination).
- 40) On the reception of the *Kawi-Werk*, Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, "Mutter Sanskrit und die Nacktheit der Südseesprachen: Das Begräbnis von Humboldts Sprachwissenschaft," *Athenäum: Jahrbuch für Romantik* 1 (1991): 109-33, at 119-23.
- 41) [August] Zeune, "Australien. Die Maliisch-Polynesischen Sprachen," *Magazin für die Literatur des Auslandes* 21, no. 21 (January 1842): 81.
- 42) [Eduard] Buschmann, "Asiatischer Archipelagus und Australien. Der Malayische Sprachstamm,"

- Magazin für die Literatur des Auslandes* 21, no. 26 (March 1842): 101, writing of "einer Alles nivellirenden Sanskrit-Liebhaberei" on Bopp's part.
- 43) [Franz] Bopp, review of *Ueber die Verwandtschaft der malayisch-polynesischen Sprachen mit den indisch-europäischen*, von Franz Bopp, in *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* 1 (1842): no. 55, 438-40; no. 56, 441-48; no. 57, 449-51.
- 44) Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010); and Lera Boroditsky, who gives a popularized summary of her work on the psychology of linguistic relativity in "Lost in Translation," *Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2010.