Part I

Wilhelm von Humboldt and the Americas

Essentials

1 Introduction

The Elder Humboldt as an Americanist Linguist and Anthropologist

In 2017, Europeans celebrated the 250th birthday of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), recognizing his achievements as a statesman, an educational reformer, and a scholar in literature, philosophy, political science, anthropology, and linguistics. Two years later followed the sestercentennial anniversary of his younger brother Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), a polymath with a focus on natural history and significant findings in physics, geology, mineralogy, botany, zoology, geography, climatology, oceanography, and astronomy besides research in chemistry, physiology, demography, and cultural anthropology. Both men were truly extraordinary individuals already during their lifetimes; but their contributions have not always been fully appreciated, as is evident for the elder brother's studies of American languages.

If Americans recognize Wilhelm von Humboldt as Alexander's elder brother, they usually associate his name with his defining role as Prussia's minister of education in the development of the modern research university as epitomized by the University of Berlin – to adopt the two brothers' name as the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin from 1949 on. Thus, the elder Humboldt significantly shaped public higher education in Prussia with snowballing effects across continental Europe and beyond. These effects directly impacted the development of research universities and graduate schools in the United States, such as Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, Columbia University, the University of Michigan, the University of Chicago, and the University of Wisconsin. His influence has extended to the discussion of the ideals of modern higher education, sometimes branded as Humboldtian myths, to the extent that we have long taken them for granted in academia: the freedom of teaching and learning, the unity of teaching and research, the harmony of science and scholarship, and the primacy of "pure" science over professional training. Current reservations about the significance and endurance of Humboldtian educational ideals in Europe have often missed the recognition of their very realization at the most thriving graduate institutions in the United States. It is as if Humboldt's educational ideals flourished at the best American institutions of higher learning (Turner 2001; Ash 2006: 245–249; Meyer 2017: especially 39–58, 112–117). Recent calls for the

final burial of Humboldt's educational ideals, as advocated by, for example, Manuel J. Hartung (2017), then brought about immediate rejoinders, by, among others, a European who had studied at American universities, Josef Joffe (2017): "Hartung sieht nicht, dass es an amerikanischen Universitäten besser läuft – gerade wegen Humboldt" ('Hartung does not acknowledge that American universities run better – precisely because of Humboldt').[1] Joffe recommends a broad liberal education following the American model, but inspired by Humboldt as the most suitable scholarly preparation for an understanding of today's complex world, including artificial intelligence, before students pursue a graduate-school education or a professional career.

One way by which Humboldt helped assure the success of educational reforms, including that of higher education, was by reducing the influence of the state in administrating universities or education at large, which as educational reformer of Prussia in 1808 and 1809 he promoted to be autonomous from the state. The university was to administer itself, from the bottom up rather than the top down, although ironically Humboldt did not hold a high opinion of his own faculty's skills in administering themselves at the University of Berlin. By Humboldt's liberal reasoning, the state had no claims to intervene in internal affairs such as education, but existed solely to prevent harm to individuals or communities, with its responsibility for maintaining their welfare and security. Humboldt's 1792 book, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen* – published in full only posthumously in 1851 and translated as *The Sphere and Duties of the Government* in 1854, and sometimes known alternatively as *The Limits of State Action* – proved a significant contribution to early discussions on the state's constraints within society. Humboldt consequently was among the first to promote the freedom of minorities such as Jews within Prussian society, despite some outstanding inconsistencies in his arguments (Grossman 1997).

By raising key issues of the French Revolution, Wilhelm von Humboldt contributed much to wider political discussions of post-Napoleonic Europe reverberating throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the Congress of Vienna from September 1814 until June 1815, Humboldt played a major role as part of the Prussian delegation headed by Prince Karl August von Hardenberg. In what apparently was the first of multiple international meetings, the Congress had several goals: to settle critical issues from the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars; to negotiate territorial claims with an overall balance of powers; and to develop an enduring peace plan. Humboldt not only proved a skillful negotiator for Prussia; he also helped build a post-Napoleonic Europe in its early modern foundations, as pointed out by

[1] All translations in this book are my own unless identified by the addition of specific references.

Bénédicte Savoy and David Blankenstein, curators of a major exhibition on the Humboldts at the Université de recherche Paris Sciences et Lettres:[2]

Au préalable, il développe un cadre général pour le traitement des questions européennes qui sera non seulement déterminant pour le maintien de l'équilibre politique entre les grands pouvoirs, mais propose aussi un langage diplomatique qui fera du Congrès de Vienne un modèle pour les négociations tenues au terme des grandes guerres du XXe siècle.

Si les questions territoriales tiennent une place prépondérante dans sa mission, Wilhelm von Humboldt a également exercé son influence sur d'autres avancées du Congrès, comme notamment l'abolition de la traite des Noires, la libre circulation navale et le rapatriement des biens culturels volés en Italie, en Allemagne et dans d'autres pays par Napoléon lors de ses campagnes.

En préparation du Congrès, Wilhelm rédige en français *Le Projet pour les régulations du congrès,* un texte qui interroge de manière précoce l'idée de la communauté européenne. (Savoy and Blankenstein 2014a: "Révolution. Régénération: Le congrès de Vienne: La construction d'une nouvelle Europe")

Prior to the Congress, Wilhelm developed a framework for addressing European issues that would prove crucial to maintaining a political balance between the major powers. He also created a diplomatic language that would make the Congress of Vienna a model for the multilateral negotiations held at the end of WWI and WWII.

Although his mission focused primarily on issues of territory and national boundaries, Wilhelm von Humboldt also exerted an influence over the Congress' other advances such as the abolition of the slave trade, free navigation, the restitution of art and artifacts stolen by Napoleon from Italy, Germany and other countries during his military campaigns, the foundation of a new German confederation or the rights of German Jews.

In preparation for the Congress, Wilhelm wrote (in French) a text entitled *Le Projet pour les régulations du congrès* (Proposal of Rules for the Congress), in which he anticipates the concept of a European community. (Savoy and Blankenstein 2014b: Section "Revolution. Regeneration: The Congress of Vienna: Building a New Europe").

In short, Humboldt set a liberal agenda for the international discussion of Europe of the next two centuries, with direct reverberations in linguistic map-making (see Chapter 7) and with many of the same issues enduring until today (see Sluga 2019).

[2] The source of the following two quotes is the website of the French virtual exhibition *Les frères Humboldt, l'Europe de l'esprit: La pensée, les voyages, les émotions esthétiques et scientifiques des frères Humboldt* by Université PSL [Paris Sciences et Lettres], Paris (Savoy and Blankenstein 2014a) and its English version, *The Humboldt Brothers – The Spirit of Europe: Their Intellectual Contributions, Ideas, Voyages, Aesthetic and Scientific Passions*. Virtual exhibition by Université PSL [Paris Sciences et Lettres], Paris (Savoy and Blankenstein 2014b). This virtual exhibit led to a book-long "catalogue" of almost 200 pages by the same main title of *Les frères Humboldt, l'Europe de l'Esprit* (The Humboldt Brothers – The Spirit of Europe) with nineteen essays on diverse themes of the exhibition, also edited by Bénédicte Savoy and David Blankenstein (2014c), but has by all indications appeared in French only.

True polyglots and cosmopolitans of their times, Wilhelm and his brother Alexander were quite sensitive to cultural differences within Europe and beyond, but did not deny their personal preferences for Rome (Wilhelm) or Paris (Alexander) as places of residence over their native Berlin, which in their minds remained rather provincial. As emissaries of education and science, the Humboldts did not know many linguistic, cultural, or political boundaries, and spent several years of their lives abroad – representing the Spirit of Europe, Wilhelm and Alexander already demonstrated and lived an integrated Europe, as only a few of their contemporaries could afford or promoted (Savoy and Blankenstein 2014a, b). With all empathies for cultural and linguistic differences of the period, the Humboldt brothers, however, avoided becoming entangled in any nationalistic discourse or ideology. Whereas Alexander usually showed little or no interest in any such issues, Wilhelm solely cared for their cultural and linguistic implications, for like his younger brother he recognized the need for any German nation to meet Enlightenment standards such as freedom, a constitutional government, justice for all, and progress, among others. In their thinking, both Humboldts were close to the poets-scholars Johann Wolfgang (von) Goethe (1749–1832) and Friedrich (von) Schiller (1759–1805), with whom they enjoyed an extraordinary friendship in a tetrad of literature and science (see Chapter 3; Figure 3.2). Literature also figured in both Humboldts' lives: Whereas Wilhelm became an exceptional man of letters in the literal as well as extended sense (Geier 2009: 233–277; see Berghahn 2022: section IV. Briefe [Letters]), Alexander would prove himself as a prime nature and travel writer, as illustrated by his *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (Humboldt 1814–29a). Rooted in philosophy at a time when disciplinary boundaries did not yet exist, another major legacy of Wilhelm von Humboldt's was comparative anthropology and linguistics, which would also draw on Alexander's Americanist descriptions, analyses, and resources.

In reminiscing about my early years of higher education in Europe, I recognize Alexander von Humboldt as a major, early source of the social sciences for South America, the Caribbean, and Mexico as an Americanist anthropologist; but to my regret, I have only vague memories about his elder brother, who did not become part of my education until later. To appreciate Wilhelm von Humboldt's intellectual gifts about language, culture, and history, I have undoubtedly benefitted from a detour in body and mind from Europe to the Americas and subsequently to the Pacific, without which I might never have gone through the transformations in thought that ultimately ensued. The elder Humboldt came to be a major source of inspiration when I became familiar with some of his linguistic writings such as "Ueber die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues" (On the Diversities of the Human Language Construction; Humboldt 1907b [1827–29]) during my graduate studies in

linguistics and anthropology in the United States. Among others, I explored questions about the hypothesis of linguistic relativity under the heading of language and culture. Humboldt figured as a central figure in discussions of how language-specific patterns influenced thought. Surprisingly, he revealed a more sophisticated understanding of complex language–thought relationships than suggested by simplistic ethnolinguistic models of linguistic relativity, excluding translations, any form of urbane bilingualism, linguistic universals, or linguistic and sociocultural change (for an introduction, see Underhill 2009; Trabant 2012: especially 133–137, 220–241). Wilhelm von Humboldt grabbed my attention again when I came across Noam Chomsky's explication of linguistic creativity in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) or *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966): the generative principle of nearly limitless options based on finite resources and the idea of an underlying structure. That Humboldt could be a source of inspiration to both universalists (such as Chomsky) as well as relativists (such as Edward Sapir) did not seem anachronistic in light of his academic breadth and theoretical maturity, just as his writings in fact have addressed other closely interrelated topics on language such as internal change and language contact (for an integrative discussion, see Thomason and Kaufman 1988). In due course, I have come to welcome other writings by Humboldt, and have done so beyond linguistics and anthropology. Eventually, this broader perspective has also brought about an awareness for a significant role by his younger brother in Wilhelm's life and ideas, just as in reverse Wilhelm had inspired Alexander's thinking.

In recent years, Chomsky's analogies to Humboldt's concepts have come under increasing scrutiny from the perspective of transformational-generative linguistics, raising questions as to the legitimacy of Chomsky's interpretation of Humboldt's notions (for recent sources, see, for example, Trabant 2012: 267–286; Mueller-Vollmer and Messling 2016: §7). In particular, Chomsky has not addressed the question of how – by what historical routes – he found inspiration from Humboldt for his ideas. To my knowledge, Chomsky has not recognized any influences from American historical links, among which we might expect him to have first identified Sapir, as argued by several other linguists over the years (see, e.g., Câmara 1970; Greenberg 1974: 28, 41, 42, 47; Hartmann 1957: 381–396). Not only was Sapir in a direct line of historical descent between nineteenth-century Humboldtians and modern transformational-generative grammarians, when compared for commonalities in basic ideas with Humboldt's notions (see Koerner 1973, 1977, 1990, 1992; Drechsel 1988; Erickson, Gymnich, and Nünning 1997), his own processual portrayal of "Southern Paiute, a Shoshonean Language" (1930) arguably served as an early historical model to transformational-generative grammarians, as his son J. David Sapir (1985: 292) has reminded us: "Modern theoretical linguistics is as much Sapir's heir as is our anthropology or our linguistic anthropology."

Chomsky (1966: 90) has only acknowledged Sapir's mentor Franz Boas, without recognizing other American linguists or anthropologists of the period who likewise thought in Humboldtian terms. Indeed, Chomsky has appeared largely oblivious to Humboldtian influences from early Americanist linguistics: a whole branch in the history of linguistics then appears to have been amiss in the anglophone discussion.

Whether Chomsky has recognized Humboldt and his complex of ideas about language in all their historical ramifications has ultimately proved of little consequence to my project. Beyond what Chomsky might consider germane for his linguistic or political philosophy, I have found several of Humboldt's ideas attractive by themselves. By studying such nonconventional languages as Basque, an isolate of Europe in the Pyrenees, he already demonstrated during an extended visit to Spain in 1801 how to pursue sociolinguistic and ethnographic field research on poorly recorded or undocumented languages, when fieldwork was still a highly elusive endeavor in linguistics or the social sciences (see Chapter 5). Subsequently, Humboldt gained access to primary empirical, comparative linguistic data on Indigenous American languages, by which he came to offer new questions, innovative approaches, and surprising answers. Next to observations of linguistic relativity, he raised questions about grammatical analysis, linguistic typology, early comparative-historical linguistics, and linguistic cartography (see Part III). Humboldt's historical-linguistic queries further revealed recurrent concerns with language contact, which led to early creole studies by Francis Lieber (1800–72), preceding Hugo Schuchardt's studies of mixed languages and *Kreolische Studien* of the late nineteenth century (see Chapter 11). The Prussian savant moreover fascinated me because he regularly addressed sociocultural questions about different language uses and history, including domains of literacy and education, and helped define the emergent field of anthropological linguistics[3] in the early nineteenth century, as few contemporaries could. Over the years, Humboldt emerged as a prime

[3] Throughout this book, I continue using "anthropological linguistics" against currently popular "linguistic anthropology." The first term reflects an established Americanist tradition of the description and analysis of non-European languages, fitting for the historiographic study of Humboldt's linguistics and his impact in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with its empiricist focus, including the study of historical relationships, language contact, linguistic typology, and linguistic universals (see, e.g., Haas 1977; Hill 2003: 92a); it also remains preferable for its methodological and theoretical attention to linguistics, while it retains a comprehensive definition, extending from basic descriptive issues to all levels of linguistic analysis, including historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, and ethnolinguistics. In contrast, "linguistic anthropology in the 2000s is most closely linked to the many subspecialities of socio-cultural anthropology – especially to those which explore the realm of symbols, ideas, and knowledge" (Hill 2003: 92b) with a distinct functional perspective, which are not the primary concern of my study. A prime example of that focus is the principle of linguistic relativity, often credited to Humboldt, who understood it only in a weak form and in the context of other linguistic factors such as translation, bi- and multilingualism, linguistic diversity, and linguistic universals rather than as symbolic, ideological, or cognitive issues per se (see Trabant 2012: 133–137, 220–241).

Americanist linguist and anthropologist for the early nineteenth century by raising many of the very same historical questions that Boas and his linguistic students would resume almost a century later (Bunzl 1996).

When it came to the study of language, Humboldt saw himself as "ein philosophisch fundierter anthropologischer Sprachforscher" (Trabant 2012: 223) or 'a philosophically founded anthropological linguist,' with a solid empirical foundation rather than as language philosopher. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (1995: 204) had however recognized a peculiar discrepancy between theory and practice in discussions of Humboldt's linguistics with an over-emphasis of philosophical aspects at the expense of his empirical studies. In reviewing Humboldt's engagement in the study of American languages, Manfred Ringmacher (2012: 10) has similarly observed: "Man hat den Eindruck, dass die Sprachforschung, je fachmännischer sie betrieben wurde, sich mit den Humboldtschen Anregungen immer schwerer tat und sie schließlich ganz aus dem Blick verlor" ('One gets the impression that the more expertly linguists pursued their research, the greater difficulty they found with Humboldt's suggestions – eventually to lose sight of them completely'). In even more unmistakable terms, Bernhard Hurch (2018: 613) reminds us that Humboldt's anthropological themes have been "in der Diskussion in geradezu anti-humboldtischer Manier ihrer empirischen Basis entkleidet und versprachphilosophiert" or 'stripped of its empirical basis in an almost anti-Humboldtian manner and overphilosophized in discussions of language.' In his contribution to the *Humboldt-Handbuch*, Jürgen Trabant (2022) sorts out the relationships between Humboldt's philosophy of language and linguistics at some depth and with a more balanced perspective.

On those rare occasions when Americans have shown awareness of Wilhelm von Humboldt as an academic, he usually carried the label of a philosopher, be it with an educational, political-diplomatic, or occasionally linguistic touch. If the elder Humboldt has received recognition as a student of languages, he has taken on the role of a *philosopher* of language rather than that of philologist or linguist, as recapitulated by Julie Tetel Andresen in her *Linguistics in America 1769–1924*:

> Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) and Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) frequented the same Parisian *salons* of the 1780s and 1790s as did Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), and there they all three met the rising group of French intellectuals who were to be known as the Ideologues. From these encounters, Franklin and Jefferson brought *idéologie* back to the New World, where it was congenially received. However, only Humboldt envisioned the static limitations of *signe* and *système* and *usage* that the Ideologues inherited from the French Enlightenment tradition of Condillac and the *grammaires générales*; only Humboldt recast linguistic philosophy in the dynamic terminology of *individuelle Taetigkeit* ['individual activity'] and *innere Sprachform* ['inner linguistic form'] which was to reshape linguistic philosophy in the nineteenth century. (Andresen 1990: 23; translations in square brackets author's)

When on other infrequent instances Western academia has remembered Humboldt as a distinct linguist *rather* than as a philosopher of language, a literary scholar, or an educator, he first appeared as a student of Classic European languages (Latin and Greek), Hebrew, Arabic, and Coptic, plus perhaps languages of South and East Asia (Sanskrit, Mandarin, and Japanese) and even the Pacific (foremost Old Javanese and occasionally Polynesian languages such as Tahitian and Hawaiian). All in all, Humboldt had only a small circle of European protégés and followers in the nineteenth century – foremost Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838), J. C. Eduard Buschmann (1805–80), Heymann Steinthal (1823–99), H. G. C. von der Gabelentz (1840–93), and Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927) – and has never enjoyed as much recognition in the Western hemisphere as his younger brother Alexander.

Hardly ever have modern linguists or anthropologists associated Humboldt with other non-Indo-European languages, among them already mentioned Basque in the Pyrenean Mountains of Spain, a linguistic isolate of Europe and the object of his linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork with living speakers (Humboldt 2013b; see Chapter 5). Even less often has the American discussion revealed much awareness of any intensive involvement by Humboldt with Indigenous languages of the Americas, while serving as Prussian emissary to the Vatican by drawing on its library from 1803 to 1808; nor does there exist much appreciation for the fact that Humboldt secured further, better linguistic data through Alexander on his explorations of the Americas and other channels, on which he would depend for his own analyses (see Chapter 6). For example, early studies of Humboldt's role in the history of linguistics, such as Robert L. Miller's *Linguistic Relativity Principle and Humboldtian Ethnolinguistics* (Miller 1968: 11–12), have barely addressed the question of American connections beyond a few footnotes. Mary R. Haas (1977: 34) in her history of anthropological linguistics recognized the St. Petersburg School of Linguistics as a major influence in linguistics, but neglected to include Humboldt as a primary historical link. While acknowledging various European philosophers in her survey of the early history of American anthropological linguistics for the *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, Regna Darnell (2003: 95) also does not include a single mention of or cross-reference to Humboldt, although the *Encyclopedia* contains a separate, full-page entry on the Prussian savant (Sweet 2003).

When on exceptional occasions Humboldt has received credit as an empirical *Americanist linguist*, the arguments in support regularly appear weak, muddled, even inconsistent with each other. In his outline history of American Indian linguistics, Alfred L. Kroeber (1939: 116) mentioned the Prussian linguist, but included him in the generation that had still "enjoyed little or no first hand contact with his materials" – a claim that was correct for American linguistic data, but not for Basque in the Pyrenees (Spain). Franklin

Edgerton acknowledged in his historical survey that early American linguistics was indebted to Wilhelm von Humboldt, but offered few specifics on how American scholarship benefitted from the Prussian's ideas (Edgerton 1943: 25a, 31a, n. 29). In "On Typology of Cognitive Styles in Language," Dell Hymes (1961b: 23) observed fittingly that "Humboldt pioneered in concern for the cognitive implications of language type. Perhaps it is less widely recognized that he specially studied American languages in this connection, and that his use of such material fed back into the development of American anthropological linguistics." For his references to Humboldt's American connections, Hymes evidently relied on Brinton's sources (Hymes 1961b: 23–24, 48, fn. 2; see Brinton 1885, 1886, 1890). When Hymes (1961b: 24–25) subsequently discussed the notion of "inner form" as used by Boas, Sapir, and other Boasians, he became aware apparently at the end of his essay that he was dealing with a concept of the Romantic period also central to Humboldt's thinking (Hymes 1961b: 54, fn. 58; see Koerner 1992: 175–178). Like Hymes, H. Christoph Wolfart (1967: 154, 156, 161, 165, 166) acknowledged Humboldt's influence in various significant ways, and made an incidental reference to his younger brother Alexander when reviewing A. Albert Gallatin's role (Wolfart 1967: 159); but he offered no substantive discussion on or references to either Humboldt in his historical notes. In her historical survey of the role of grammar against the lexicon from Peter S. Duponceau to J. W. Powell, Haas (1969b: 240b, 250b, 253b) gave even less recognition to Humboldt except through words by American Humboldtians rather than Humboldt's own. Still, Daniel G. Brinton's reference to Humboldt in terms of "surface morphology," "logical substructure," or "inner form," and the significance of grammar over the lexicon in historical analysis not only echoed fundamental ideas by Humboldt; but they were central to the thought of Haas' mentor, Edward Sapir (whom surprisingly, on this occasion, she did not acknowledge as a historical link either), and again resounded in redefined terms as underlying form or deep structure in discussions of modern transformational-generative grammar (as recognized by Haas herself in an accompanying footnote). Alas, Humboldt received recognition for little more than his proposal that "all languages of the world could be divided into four types (isolating, agglutinative, incorporative, and inflective) [and] included the American languages among those of the incorporative plan" (Haas 1969b: 253b). Amnesia still affected other linguists. According to Hymes (1975: 361), "Whorf did not apparently remember Steinthal or von Humboldt; and after the Second World War, no one, it seemed for a while, remembered Boas or Sapir." William Bright (1997: 603) similarly reminisced with astonishment: "Although my principal teachers, Mary R. Haas and Murray B. Emeneau, were among the most distinguished students of Edward Sapir, my courses with them