

Wilhelm von Humboldt and Early American Linguistics

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), an early pioneer in the philosophy of language, linguistic and educational theory, was not only one of the first European linguists to identify human language as a rule-governed system – the foundational premise of Noam Chomsky’s generative theory – or to reflect on cognition in studying language; he was also a major scholar of Indigenous American languages. However, with his famous naturalist brother Alexander “stealing the show,” Humboldt’s contributions to linguistics and anthropology have remained understudied in English until today. Drechsel’s unique book addresses this gap by uncovering and examining Humboldt’s influences on diverse issues in nineteenth-century American linguistics, from Peter S. Duponceau to the early Boasians, including Edward Sapir. This study shows how Humboldt’s ideas have shaped the field in multiple ways. Shining a light on one of the early innovators of linguistics, it is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of the field.

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Wilhelm von Humboldt and Early American Linguistics

Resources and Inspirations

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To my wife
T. Haunani Makuakāne-Drechsel

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Preface

Although known for diverse achievements, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) did not acquire much of a reputation as an Americanist linguist or anthropologist, usually ascribed to his younger, often better-known brother Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). As explorer and geographer, Alexander indeed gathered significant linguistic, ethnographic, and historical materials in the Americas for Wilhelm, and served as a major contact with American academics on his older brother's behalf. Significantly, these resources then provided the elder Humboldt with empirical data on several American languages and societies for a broadly defined anthropological linguistics, literally Americanizing his comparative perspective and introducing new questions, innovative approaches, and surprising answers. By extension of his younger brother and through American contacts, Wilhelm von Humboldt came to exert major influences on two generations of nineteenth-century American linguists and anthropologists, foremost on Peter S. Duponceau, John Pickering, A. Albert Gallatin, Francis Lieber, Albert S. Gatschet, and Daniel G. Brinton, as only occasionally recognized. Additionally, Humboldt's ideas set the future stage for modern anthropological linguistics by Franz Boas and his linguistics students, principally Alfred L. Kroeber and Edward Sapir, in the early twentieth century, although they vociferously rejected any evolutionary relics of the nineteenth century.

Much awareness of these Humboldtian Americanist roots has been forgotten since World War I, similarly to Alexander's central role in the development of American natural science. Unlike his younger brother, who had been to Philadelphia and Washington, Wilhelm von Humboldt never visited the Americas, which explains his worse fate in the United States than Alexander's. The current book attempts to make up some of this loss, and presents the elder Humboldt as a significant Americanist scholar, whose contributions had a major impact on early American linguistics and anthropology. It offers an integrated translation and paraphrase of key anthropological-linguistic ideas by Humboldt to an anglophone audience, who traditionally have enjoyed little exposure to his thought beyond the frequently cited – and sometimes misunderstood – Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity

and Noam Chomsky's interpretations of Humboldtian key concepts. Attention here turns instead to sociolinguistic and ethnographic field research (as Humboldt originally developed with Basque, an isolate language of Europe, in the Pyrenees, Spain), the idea of linguistic and cultural otherness (*alterity*), early notions of comparative linguistics, phonological and morphological-syntactic analysis, the Romantic concept of inner form, questions of linguistic typology, divergences in language use and sociolinguistic contexts, and requirements for a broadly conceived diachronic approach beyond the standard comparative method.

Acknowledgments

Initial plans for this book already took root in 1988, shortly after I had published an article on analogies and homologies in ideas by Wilhelm von Humboldt and Edward Sapir (Drechsel 1988). I subsequently put aside my plans for several years because of other commitments, but never abandoned the study of Humboldt's impact on early American linguistics and anthropology, meanwhile accumulating historical references and consulting elders in the discipline. My aspirations have finally come to fruition. I returned to a more intensive study of this topic during my sabbatical in 2015–16, when I could pay visits to the library of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz* (State Library of Berlin, Prussian Cultural Heritage), and other archives to examine original historical documents on Humboldt and his American contacts. I pursued this project after retirement in summer 2018, the results of which appear in the present book.

Just as the current venture had already lingered in the back of my mind for several years, I have always considered it as related to my other historical-sociolinguistic projects, which – together with the current one – I have comprehended in a wider sociohistorical context. At first sight, the present historiographic study might not have much in common with my earlier ones, *Mobilian Jargon: Linguistic and Sociohistorical Aspects of a Native American Pidgin* (Drechsel 1997) or *Language Contact in the Early Colonial Pacific: Maritime Polynesian Pidgin before Pidgin English* (Drechsel 2014). However, analogies soon emerge with the recognition that all three books deal with the era of explorations in the Americas and, by extension, in the Pacific during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Beyond raising questions of how to discover distant horizons, all three books deal with voyaging across borders of one's linguistic-cultural tradition, and address issues of language contact, either principally (as in the first two instances) or secondarily as part of Humboldt's broad understanding of historical linguistics. Just as European explorers, missionaries, and traders had encountered Mobilian Jargon and Maritime Polynesian Pidgin when visiting the lower Mississippi River valley and the eastern Pacific respectively, the Humboldts journeyed in body or mind across much of Europe and the Americas to experience major conceptual transformations about language, culture, and history, before they

would eventually put out feelers to the Pacific. It is no historical accident that, for example, the naturalist and ethnologist Georg Forster (1754–94), who had sailed with the British explorer James Cook on his second voyage to the Pacific and had made significant observations on Maritime Polynesian Pidgin (Drechsel 2014: especially 107–118), inspired the Humboldts in their thinking about nature and culture in the years of the French Revolution (see Chapter 3). My three books moreover address related questions of the nature of colonialism in the Western hemisphere during much the same historical period (i.e. the late eighteenth into the nineteenth century, with persistent effects into our times), just as they advocate a more diversified understanding of history.

Indeed, I consider *Wilhelm von Humboldt and Early American Linguistics* as part of a historical-sociolinguistic trilogy with my other major publications. Like my previous books, the current study raises similar fundamental questions of a broadly defined historical-sociolinguistic nature (i.e. a historical sociolinguistics with an explicitly anthropological perspective, including biography, ethnohistory, and philology). That *Mobilian Jargon* and *Language Contact in the Early Colonial Pacific* deal with historical communities of language contact, and the current book primarily with the lives and experiences of those who did early linguistic-ethnographic or philological-historical research, merely reflects differences of focus, but ultimately has negligible methodological or theoretical consequences. Not only can we approach the study of our own history like that of another culture (as anthropologists have done); but in principle, ethnohistory and historical biography draw on much of the same premises and resources for the interpretation and analysis of information, be they traditional language uses, historical small-scale communities, or individuals who studied such, along with their sociohistorical experiences and milieus as sociolinguistic-historical contexts.

Over the years, several individuals have inspired my research, have made this book possible, and deserve special acknowledgment. Foremost, I wish to recognize my late stepfather, Laurence Stanley Hubbard (1924–2014), an all-round scholar who first acquainted me with Humboldt's linguistic writings and on one of my birthdays surprised me with a collection of essays on Humboldt and Indigenous American languages (Zimmermann, Trabant, and Mueller-Vollmer 1994) as a gift. I have missed my stepfather's insightful opinions, serving as soft criticism, and wish I could share a copy of my book with him. My book also carries markings by the late Meinhard Schuster (1930–2021), Professor Emeritus of Ethnology at the Universität Basel, with whom I enjoyed my first years of intensive studies in cultural anthropology. During my recent visits to Europe, he enriched my understanding of American historiography with a European perspective and valuable suggestions for the pursuit of the current project. I similarly recognize the late William W. Elmendorf (1912–97), Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of

Wisconsin-Madison. As a former student of Alfred L. Kroeber (1876–1960) and as part of the second generation of post-Boasian anthropologists and linguists in the United States after World War II (see Koerner 1990), Elmendorf helped carry on the Humboldtian tradition and develop an interest in the analysis of language as part of ethnography and culture history; he moreover instilled in me a strong sense of historical linguistics with a distinct anthropological twist, as I believe Humboldt would have embraced as well. As a former student of Elmendorf's, I have consequently become much more conscious of my own link to Kroeber's role in the history of linguistics. Little could I yet dream during my graduate-student years that my exposure to South American sociolinguistics, including one year of Quechua, would benefit my understanding of Humboldt; I have to thank another of my former university teachers, Professor Louisa R. Stark, for her far-reaching insights extending across the hemisphere. Much less did I even envision writing such a book at the time, had it not been for the enthusiastic encouragement by the late historiographer of linguistics E. F. Konrad Koerner (1939–2022) for me to pursue historical research on Humboldt and Sapir and the current project.

I owe a special gratitude to the late Peter T. Manicas (1934–2015), former director of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and author of the *History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (1987). As a philosopher, sociologist, and historian of the social sciences, he principally empathized with Humboldt's educational and academic objectives, whether or not he was always aware of his arguments. As a senior colleague, mentor, and friend, Peter lent generous support to my research endeavors in linguistics, anthropology, and history in a truly Humboldtian fashion. I have also received substantial support from my colleague Jaishree Odin, subsequent director of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, which I gratefully acknowledge here. In addition, I recognize Robert Bley-Vroman, interim chancellor of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (2014–16). Fully aware of Humboldt's significance to linguistics at large and the study of Pacific languages in particular, he encouraged my research project without reservations, and removed growing administrative hurdles to my plans for a six-month sabbatical in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, graciously supported by the University of Hawai'i. Acknowledgment, too, is due to Kamil Deen, Victoria B. Anderson, and Andrea L. Berez-Kroeker, chairs of the Linguistics department for sponsoring me as an adjunct professor in that department and thus ensuring continued access to the university's research resources after my retirement from Interdisciplinary Studies in Summer 2018.

All these years, my project has gained from discussions with Robert E. Bieder, the late Robert A. Blust, Julien Cavero, Michael L. Forman, the late Mary R. Haas, Manfred Henningsen, Peter Hoffenberg, Frances Karttunen, William O'Grady, Peter Palm, the late John E. and Aiko Reinecke, the late

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Albert J. Schütz, Niklaus R. Schweizer, Leslie Sponsel, the late Edward Stankiewicz, and my philosopher cousin Ronald Suter. In particular, I appreciate Bob Blust's willingness to read and comment on an early version of Chapter 9: "From the Americas to the Pacific." My historiographic research for this book has further drawn inspiration from recent historical studies on Humboldt by the late Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (especially 1976, 1993, 1995, and 1998) and Jürgen Trabant (foremost 1994, 2012, 2015b, and 2022), although I have not had the good fortune of meeting either scholar. I moreover take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to Helen Barton, senior commissioning editor of language and linguistics, and Isabel Collins, editorial assistant for language, linguistics, and anthropology, both at Cambridge University Press, for their continuous encouragement and guidance in making this book a reality. I also acknowledge the kind appraisals by two anonymous reviewers, the editorial suggestions by Laheba Alam, Content Manager, Academic Books and Joseph Shaw, Copy Editor, Cambridge University Press, and the assistance by Daniel JebaRajan, Project Management Executive, Integra Software Services.

My research has gained much from the bibliographic advice by David Brier, Social Sciences Librarian, David Gustavsen, Humanities Librarian (Languages and Linguistics), Sarah Nakashima, Humanities Librarian (History and American Studies), and Brian Richardson, Instructional Design Librarian (Business, Humanities and Social Sciences Reference) as well as from loans by the Interlibrary Loan Office, with the assistance of Malia McGoldrick, all at Hamilton Library of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I too recognize the Library of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, in particular Brian Carpenter, archivist of the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research (CNAIR), for granting me access to its various manuscript collections (such as the correspondence by American scholars with the Humboldt brothers) in October 2015. Special acknowledgment is due to the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz* (State Library of Berlin, Prussian Cultural Heritage), principally its manuscript collections with Birgit Bucher and Kurt Heydeck as librarians of the section "Abendländische Handschriften" (Occidental Manuscripts), who kindly directed me to relevant manuscripts by the Humboldt brothers and other pertinent documents in April 2016. I have additionally benefitted from easy access to the online linguistic correspondence of Wilhelm von Humboldt administered by the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften* ('Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities') and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) and the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung (Fritz Thyssen Foundation for the Promotion of Science). From a distance, their website of online correspondence by and in response to Humboldt at *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Sprachwissenschaftliche Korrespondenz* (<https://wvh-briefe.bbaw.de/>) has provided an easy retrieval

of historical documentation relevant to his exchanges with American contacts; it has proved even more significant in light of the fact that I had to abandon my plans for a follow-up visit to European libraries in 2020 or 2021 as a result of the recent coronavirus pandemic

For graphic enhancements, my discussion includes several illustrations, including portraits and maps: a drawing of Friedrich (von) Schiller, the two Humboldt brothers, and Johann Wolfgang (von) Goethe by Andreas Müller (1811–90) as published by the illustrated periodical *Die Gartenlaube* (Diezmann 1860: 229) in Figure 3.2 (by Wikisource in the public domain); a map of Alexander von Humboldt's American explorations, 1799–1804 by Peter Palm (© Peter Palm, Berlin, 2022) in Map 4.1; a portrait of Alexander von Humboldt by Charles Willson Peale of 1804 in Figure 4.1 (in the public domain); a map of the languages of Europe in 1812 as based on the instructions sent by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1812 MS) to Wolfgang (von) Goethe and as reconstructed by Julien Caverio for David Blankenstein and colleagues (2020), *Wilhelm von Humboldt, d'après une idée de Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Instructions pour la réalisations d'une carte générale des langues*, pages 76–77 (© Julien Caverio, 2020; English translation of the map: © Julien Caverio, 2022) in Map 7.1; a lithographic portrait of Wilhelm von Humboldt by Friedrich Oldermann after a painting by Franz Krüger before 1835 in Figure 10.1 (by Wikipedia in the public domain); a map of major American Indian language families of eastern North America by Albert Gallatin of 1836 in Map 10.1 (by Wikipedia in the public domain); and a map of fifty-eight linguistic families of North America by John Wesley Powell of 1891 in Map 11.1 (by Wikipedia in the public domain).

I likewise recognize my family for their ongoing support of my research and work, starting with my wife, T. Haunani Makuakāne-Drechsel, whom I met during our graduate-student days in the early 1970s. Acknowledgment is also due to my late sister, Cornelia Drechsel, for providing accommodation and comfort in our family home “Seewiesen” near Romanshorn, Switzerland, on the shore of Lake Constance, where I wrote the first chapters to this book. Moreover, I am grateful to my brother, Tenpa Hubbard, and his family for their warm hospitality during recent visits to Switzerland. Since moving to Hawai‘i over thirty years ago to join Haunani’s family, I have enjoyed the *aloha* of the extended Makuakāne ‘ohana. *Mahalo nui loa* ‘Thank you very much’ to all for their generous sustenance!