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Theory of the inner form of language

theory according to which each language is a relatively unitary system defined by specific formative principles distinguishing it from all other languages in the world.

Theorie der inneren Sprachform: Theorie, nach der jede Einzelsprache als ein Gefüge von besonderen Gestaltungsprinzipien und als eine ideelle Einheit zu verstehen ist, wodurch sie sich von anderen Sprachen unterscheidet.

The *theory of the inner form of language* has occupied a central place in research on WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT, in particular since the interpretation of HUMBOLDT's work by H. STEINTHAL in the 19th century. This is somewhat surprising given that the term 'inner form (of language)' (German *innere Form* or *innere Sprachform*) only appears in one of HUMBOLDT's writings, albeit in the famous extensive introduction to his treatise on the Malayo-Polynesian Kawi language (HUMBOLDT 1830-1835), where the term is used eleven times (DI CESARE 1998: 87). More importantly, however, the term does not designate a property of language that stands on its own, but rather the contrary. HUMBOLDT goes to great lengths to relate the inner form to the no less important outer form of language. While the outer form is the specific organisation of the sound system in a particular language, the inner form is its characteristic mental organisation (*geistige Eigenthümlichkeit*), i.e. the "semantische Gestaltung [, die] in jeder Sprache eine verschiedene Organisation der lexikalischen und grammatikalischen Bedeutungen bewirkt" ('the semantic

constitution causing a different organisation of the lexical and grammatical meanings in every language', DI CESARE 1998: 85). With the term inner form, HUMBOLDT stresses how important it is to take into account the differences between languages in order to provide an adequate answer to the question how linguistic meanings are generated and relate to the external world. It is important to note that to HUMBOLDT, the inner and outer forms of a language are manifestations of the form of language in a more general sense.

The notion of 'form' is central to HUMBOLDT's philosophy of language and goes back to his interpretation of the works of ARISTOTLE, LEIBNIZ and KANT, among others. HUMBOLDT opposes the form of language to its 'matter' and distinguishes several strata: first, language in general constitutes the matter for the particular forms of the individual languages; likewise, the external world is the matter for the language specific form of lexical items (words), which again serve as the matter for the language specific form of grammar, etc. Throughout this reasoning, language is conceived as *forma formans* in the Aristotelian sense: the creative activity of speech (*das jedesmalige Sprechen*) is not just a reiteration or confirmation of previous discourse (*forma formata*), but always goes beyond what has already been said, with regard to form as well as content. This is why HUMBOLDT claims that the true essence of language is *Enérgeia*, while at the same time he points out that speaking does not emerge *ab ovo*; it is a historical activity in which existing patterns are incessantly altered (*umgestalten*, HUMBOLDT 1830-1835: §8). HUMBOLDT conceives the inner form of language in terms of a network of 'analogies' (cf. DI CESARE 1998: 78) that can undergo changes only when different languages merge or important cultural and historical changes take place. Not surprisingly, HUMBOLDT's theory of the inner form of language is intimately connected with his belief, ultimately rooted in an anthropological view of linguistics, that each language has to be studied as a historical and cultural individual, with the consequence that the typological object in linguistics (*Sprachtypus*) is a particular language understood as "eine Classe für sich" ('a class of its own', 1827-1829: §33) which embodies a unique world view (*Weltansicht*).

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