

# **Are there insurmountable limits to translation?**

## **A Wittgensteinian critique of Humboldt's linguistic relativism<sup>1</sup>**

Gunnar Schumann, FernUniversität in Hagen

Again and again, the question arises as to whether belonging to a certain culture has an influence on thinking, and, above all, whether the respective individual language of a culture influences thinking and the “worldview” of its members. This claim is often enough a commonplace of philosophers of culture, psychologists, linguists, ethnologists, as well as laymen.<sup>2</sup> Often the idea plays an essential role that there are peculiarities in certain languages that are untranslatable to others<sup>3</sup> – if not between European languages, surely between European and exotic languages (e.g. of American natives) (to which relativistic arguments of Humboldt, Whorf or Quine like to refer). In the following, linguistic-relativistic reflections are presented, in particular as they can be found in the writings on philosophy of language of Wilhelm von Humboldt, and then critically examined on the basis of some reflections inspired by the philosophy of the late Wittgenstein. The point of my critique is not that the thesis of linguistic relativism is not (yet) sufficiently empirically confirmed but that it makes no sense. It is based on the a priori false premise that language (a natural individual language) is a *medium of thought*.

### **1 The idea of a linguistic relativity of thought**

#### **1.1 Humboldt's relativistic theses on the connection between languages and thought**

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a shortened version of: Schumann, Gunnar: „Sprachlicher Kulturrelativismus oder Universalismus? Gibt es unüberwindliche Grenzen der Übersetzung oder eine gemeinsame Sprache des Denkens?“, in Busche, Hubertus / Heinze, Thomas / Hillebrandt, Frank / Schäfer, Franka (Hrsg.): *Kultur – interdisziplinäre Zugänge*, Springer 2018: 489-509.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Rolf Elberfeld assumes “with Herder, Humboldt and Nietzsche that the use of language in general has a fundamental cognitive function” as he put it (Elberfeld 2012, p. 14, my translation). He also agrees with Humboldt that both the universalizing and the relativizing view of the language are justified (Elberfeld 2012, p. 15).

<sup>3</sup> The *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* of 2013, a dictionary of “untranslatable” philosophical expressions, states in its preface that the “starting point of each entry is a node of untranslatability” (Cassin 2013, p. 2).

The German philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt can be considered as the founder of the principle of linguistic relativity of thought (Werlen 2002: 162).<sup>4</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder already seems to imply it in his writings (Herder 1985: 231, 234f) and turns against the in his view unjustly universalistic tendency of Kant's talk of "truths of synthetic a priori nature". It was Humboldt who explicitly stated the dictum that "language is worldview". For Humboldt, there is a close connection between language and thought: "thinking is not merely dependent on language in general, but, to a certain degree, also determined by each individual one" (Humboldt 1820, § 17). For Humboldt, it is even the "most important and highest" task of nascent linguistics to investigate the impact of language on thought (Humboldt 2010, p. 67). According to Humboldt, language does more than just designating perceived objects. The essence of language is "to pour the matter of the phenomenal world into the form of thought" (Humboldt 1820, § 14). Language does not have merely the passive role to provide means of expression:

"The intellectual act, which produces the unity of the concept, corresponds, as a sensible sign, to that of the word, and both must accompany each other as closely as possible in thought through language. For just as the strength of reflection produces separation and individualization of sounds through articulation, so again it has to work its way back to the matter of thought in a separating and individualizing manner"  
[Humboldt 1820, § 16].

In particular, the influence of language on thinking concerns the individual words that constitute the main elements of the language. So there is a "set of concepts, and also grammatical peculiarities, which are so inextricably interwoven in the individuality of their language that they cannot be transferred [...] to another without change" (Humboldt 1820, § 17). According to Humboldt, the individual words of certain natural languages contribute something to the understanding of the concepts they express, in particular because of their "side-relation to sensation" (Humboldt 1820, § 18). (Today we would speak of "association"). Thus, a new impression of the word arises and when it becomes a habit, it contributes "a new moment to the individualization of the concept, which is more indefinite in itself" (ibid.). This happens mostly "unconsciously" and would only become visible "as a whole" (ibid.). Humboldt claims that the formation and use of words necessarily requires something

---

<sup>4</sup> Even though it was not until the 20th century that its explicit and most prominent formulation was formulated by Benjamin Lee Whorf (Whorf 1963).

“subjective”, for the word is not an impression of the object directly, but of the inner impression of the object on the mind (Humboldt 1827-29, § 61). Since all objective perception is allegedly inevitably mixed with “subjectivity” (ibid., this is how Humboldt understands Kant), every individual becomes a separate view of the world by language. In this context, language is something between subject and object: in language both are combined in a certain way. According to Humboldt, to learn a foreign language is to gain a new worldview. However, since one always carries his own world view into the new language, success in learning a foreign language will never be complete (see Humboldt 1827-29, § 61).

In general, communication between speakers works as follows, according to Humboldt:

“People do not understand each other by exchanging signs of things, nor by determining each other to produce exactly and completely the same concept, but by mutually touching in each other upon the same link in the chain of their sensory perception and their inner concept formations, strike the same key of their mental instrument, after which in each the corresponding but not the same concept is generated. Only within these boundaries and with these divergences they come together on the same word. When naming the ordinary object, e.g., a horse, they all mean the same animal, but everybody connects to the word another idea, more sensuous or rational, more alive, closer to a thing or a dead sign.” (Humboldt 2010, p. 559f.)

Of course, according to Humboldt, a nation (speaker community) has the same language as a whole, but not all individuals in it, each person really has her own. No one thinks with a word just what the other thinks. All understanding is thus at the same time a non-understanding (see Humboldt 1827-29, § 65). Humboldt thus presents himself as a staunch advocate of a linguistic dependence of thought – down to the level of the individual. However, Humboldt explicitly excludes so-called “constructed concepts” of mathematics and the sciences from his thesis on the cultural relativity of thought and language (Humboldt 1820, § 17, 21).

## **1.2 Critique of Humboldt's Linguistic Relativism**

### **1.2.1 The vocabulary of a language does not affect thought**

Let us examine the arguments for the linguistic and thus thought relativism that Humboldt puts forward: Let us begin with the above-mentioned “set of concepts and grammatical

peculiarities which are so inextricably interwoven in the individuality of their language that they cannot be transferred into another language without change” (Humboldt 1820, § 17). It is not easy to understand what Humboldt means here. The concept *horse*, for example, can be characterized just as that what is linked to the English word “horse”, to the German word “Pferd” and to the French word “cheval”. A concept does not belong to a particular language – words do. And words can be translated into other languages. Maybe there is not always *one* word in a target language that is an adequate translation – but then the word must be translated by several ones (or even a whole text). The French word for the German “bitte” is “s’il te plaît” or “s’il vous plaît”, which literally means “If you want / they want”. But the way of use which speakers of French make of their expression for “bitte” corresponds exactly to that part of the German’s use of the expression “bitte”, so that it can be said without further ado that “s’il te plaît “ or “s’il vous plaît” is the correct translation of “bitte”. That there are not always one-to-one correlations between words of different languages does not show that there are untranslatable words.

Humboldt says that the ideas associated with individual words add to the understanding of the concept – but this seems to be simply wrong. Admittedly, associations with words may be different from speaker to speaker of a common language: A rice farmer may have positive feelings when he hears the word “rain”, a river valley dweller may feel uneasy due to his association of “rain” with high tide – but that says nothing about the meaning of “rain”. Both speakers have the same concept and can understand each other when talking about rain. For most words, speakers have absolutely no feelings or associations at all, much less permanent ones. What associations do speakers usually have when they use the words “from”, “and”, “fourteen”, “traffic”, “blue” and “Federal Administrative Court”? Often none at all. And if somebody compulsively associates the word “horse” with an image of a mustang and someone else associates a picture of a farm horse, both speakers can still communicate and not talk past each other, as in the case of a genuine equivocation (as in “bank” as edge of a water and “bank” as a credit institution). It is quite irrelevant to the meaning of a word what the speaker imagines or feels, what he thinks about, what he associates when he speaks it: The meaning of a linguistic expression is determined the use it is put to. Everything could and nothing specific must be in the mind of a speaker for an expression to get its meaning.

### **1.2.2 The meaning of words is not determined to an absolute degree**

The thesis of the difference in meaning of a word among different speakers may rest on the implicit premise that the meaning of words is or should be determined to the highest degree. But the idea that meaning must be absolutely determined so that an expression has meaning at all, is misguided. We usually explain the meaning of “horse” by some rough features: “The big animal with hooves, on which you can ride and has a mane and a tail and neighs and eats hay” – not by specifying (all) our associations with the word “horse”. Of course, the enumeration of characteristics of horses just given may not be sufficient for a biological definition of the species “horse”, but then one demands a more precise definition of a concept, not the most conceivably precise. Scientists define their concepts more precisely than they are defined in everyday language, so that they can use their concepts to formulate more law-like statements and distinguish them from other types of animals that would normally not be thought of in everyday life. The precision with which we define linguistic expressions always depends on the purposes we pursue with these expressions and is not fixed to an absolute degree. It would, for example, be absurd to demand a degree of scientific precision in the definition of a horse if we wanted to explain to a small child what a horse in contrast to e.g. a cow is. Ludwig Wittgenstein argues in the “Philosophical Investigations” that absolute precision in the definition of meaning of concepts cannot be achieved anyway. Definitions can be understood as a rule for linguistic use, e.g.: “Only call that a “horse” that ...”. But, according to Wittgenstein, for every rule another rule could be invented governing the application of the first rule and thus *ad infinitum*. In order for linguistic communication to be possible, no absolute precision in the rules of word usage is need – just as e.g. tennis is not an unplayable game simply because it is not clear how high the ball may be thrown when serving (see Wittgenstein 1984, § 68). In addition, meanings of words always have to be explained by using other words, for which the question of their precise meaning can be asked again, and thus *ad infinitum*. And ostensive definitions just do not provide the desired fixation of meaning by a combination of a word and an object – because the sample (what is pointed at) already belongs to the language (Wittgenstein 1984, §§ 28ff).

Humboldt held that a new impression of a word adds a new moment to the individualization of the “indeterminate concept” (Humboldt 1820, § 18). But it makes no sense to speak of an *per se* “indeterminate concept”. Only regarding a specific linguistic purpose it makes sense to say that a concept is sufficiently well-defined or indeterminate. And there is no such thing as an “unconscious” definition or change of meaning of a concept (as Humboldt thought to be possible), because you cannot use a word in a certain meaning while

not knowing it. And when the meaning of an expression changes, without the speakers noticing it, apparently the meaning has not changed at all.

### 1.2.3 Humboldt's Cartesian-Lockean premises

As already stated in the above quote, Humboldt endeavors what one might call the “piano metaphor of communication”: Speakers “touch in each other upon the same link in the chain of their sensory perception and their inner concept formations, strike the same key of their mental instrument, after which in each the corresponding but not the same concept is generated. “ (Humboldt 2010, p. 559f.).

Although this remark is quite obscure for its metaphorical expression, it is clear that Humboldt here represents a very Cartesian-Lockean picture of the workings of language. According to it, words acquire their meaning by reference to inner ideas (Humboldt speaks of “concepts”) (see Locke 2006, III.2.8) and communication between two speakers consists in that they use the same word, thus producing the “corresponding” – but not the same – idea in each other’s mind.<sup>5</sup> Both speakers do not grasp and have one and the same thought, but only very similar one when they understand each other. Humboldt does not tackle the obvious problem of how to ensure that the other person is actually grasping the right idea or concept when using the same word. Yet the basic Cartesian assumption that every speaker has access only to his own inner mental world precludes a comparison of the two ideas or concepts, so that the identity of ideas required for communication is never guaranteed. Thus, speakers can never be sure that they are talking about the same thing and understand each other. But obviously, this is cannot be true: Speakers of the same language can usually communicate without any problems. Locke had at least seen this absurd consequence of his theory of linguistic meaning and held additionally that ideas secretly refer to two other things: to ideas in the mind of others and to real things in the world outside (see Locke 2006, III.2.4) (although he was not entitled to do so by his theory of meaning (see Anscombe [n.d.]: 60f) but still did not give it up). In contrast, Humboldt bites the bullet and holds the paradoxical view that “all understanding is at the same time a non-understanding” (Humboldt 1830-35, § 65).<sup>6</sup> However, this seems to be the worst of all alternatives.

---

<sup>5</sup> „Nobody thinks what the other person [...].“ (Humboldt 1830-35, § 65).

<sup>6</sup> Herder is aware of the problem though: “Does the other one understand me? Does he associate with the word the idea that I connected with it, or does he not associate any?” (Herder 1985, p. 232f). Herder seems to accept the impossibility of checking successful communication and Humboldt succeeds in following it.

According to this Cartesian-Lockean picture of meaning, ideas or “concepts” represent abstract, i.e. sensually imperceptible objects in the mind, to which each speaker has exclusive private access. But this picture is due to the scientific misunderstanding of reifying ideas and concepts and of taking the mind to be as an ethereal private space in which these quasi-entities are firmly enclosed. However, we do not in fact use the term “concept” to refer to an object (not even to abstract ones in a metaphysical mental realm). When two speakers talk about the same thing, they have *one and the same* concept, not two very similar (just as two people who have the same goal, have *one and the same* goal and not two very similar or two people who have a throbbing pain in the right temple have *one and the same* pain, not two very similar). Here one could object: “But it could be that the other’s concept of the horse is not my concept of the horse, just as his pain is not my pain.” – Yes, if the pain resp. the concepts can be described differently. But “having a concept (of something)” is not the same as “having an object”. The fact that two speakers have different concepts of “horse” is only shown when there is a relevant difference in their linguistic or non-linguistic behavior regarding horses, not by the fact that the speakers have two different ethereal entities in their minds. The use of the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity has no application in concepts (as well as for pains, intentions and beliefs). We individuate and distinguish concepts according to what *they are concepts of*, not who they allegedly belong to. The expression “to have a concept” is misconstrued when taken to mean the possession of an object. To say that someone has the concept of a horse means just as little that he possesses an object as to say that he still has a lot of work to do. To have acquired the concept of the horse means to be able to identify horses sufficiently, to be able to make true statements about horses, to explain to others what a horse is, a.s.o. “To have a concept” means to have a bundle of abilities of publicly observable behavior that allows the attribution of the concept – not to possess a (metaphysical) object. Having a concept means mastering the use of an expression in a language (see Hacker 2013, p. 384).

It has already been mentioned that Humboldt makes an exception to his relativistic view of words for the non-perceptible objects of the formal and empirical sciences. According to Humboldt, these words can be translated from one language into another, without any loss of meaning, because they are “purely constructible” and “cannot contain more and nothing else than has been put in them” (Humboldt 1820, § 21). But this point seems to me to indicate an inconsistency in Humboldt, because in “constructed concepts” of the sciences only an *explicit* agreement / stipulation (rule of use) is made. Everyday concepts are governed by rules of use, too, even if not by explicit rules. The meaning of concepts of everyday language is

determined by the language community as a whole and not just by a part, such as the scientists of the individual disciplines. The meaning of everyday concepts is determined by rules of use which result from an established practice of language. When we teach children the meaning of words we teach these rules – either explicitly or through our exemplary verbal behavior. And if we do not know the meaning of a particular word ourselves, then we take a look at the dictionary in which the rules of use are laid down. There is thus no fundamental difference between the so-called “constructed concepts” of the sciences and everyday concepts: their meaning is constituted by rules of use in either way. Language is thus not an *individual* world view, but is only possible if all speakers in principle have the same world view (agree in their judgments, as Wittgenstein says (see Wittgenstein 1984, § 242)).

Some words have several meanings in one language that do not coincide with the meanings of their analogues in other languages. In German, “bitte” is used not only for requests but also, e.g., in response to “thank you”. (The French language, e.g., has two different words: “s’il vous plaît” and “de rien”.) But that does not mean that a French listener of a German speaker saying “bitte” would always be mentally busy to find out what the German on a certain occasion was saying. Usually, the context of the situation simply makes it clear which of the two meanings is relevant. And if there remains a doubt, then the correct meaning could still be identified in principle by an extension of the observed context. Again, it is not a mysterious relationship to some mental entity inside the speaker that determines the meaning of expression.

Humboldt further attempts to argue for his thesis of language as worldview by pointing out that every significant writer has his own language (see Humboldt 1830-35, § 65). But here we must ask what this is supposed to mean: If it means that important writers have developed their own style of language then that may be true – but it just is false when it means that different writers of the same language community actually speak different languages! The idea of a private language is incoherent, and Humboldt’s view is in striking contradiction to another of his prominent views, namely, that language is not a free product of an individual but always belongs to the whole nation (language community). According to Humboldt, the objectivity of language is only given when the speaker can see the thought outside from him, which is only possible in another thinking being (see Humboldt 1830-35, p. 201). This could almost be called a precursor of Wittgenstein’s private-language argument if Humboldt had elaborated it in more detail and showed a greater awareness of the distinction between empirical-linguistical and conceptual-philosophical theses. According to Wittgenstein, there can be no private language, because, in short, only the speaker community and not the

individual himself can provide the standard of correct use of a word. In a private language the individual speaker would be so to speak judge and culprit at the same time – and the idea of correctness loses its meaning. In fact, language belongs to everyone, as Humboldt rightly puts it – but that is precisely why no one can speak his own language.

## **2. The relationship between language and thought**

So how must the relationship between language and thought be described then? The question requires a comprehensive answer, which I only can outline here. I want to point out with Peter Hacker:<sup>7</sup> Thinking has no medium.<sup>8</sup> Neither particular natural languages nor a “non-acquired” Language of Thought are the medium of thought. Admittedly, what we think is (mostly) expressed and communicated in language. But when we speak to ourselves “in our mind”, then this is only an contingent psychological phenomenon which is neither sufficient nor necessary for thinking. It is not sufficient, because I can, for example, deliberately sing a song silently or recite the multiplication table, to divert me from thinking of something specific. Inner speaking is also not necessary for thinking, because thinking is not a specific inner activity. Nothing specific has to occur in the mind of a thinker (like, internal muttering of words or imagining pictures) in order that it could be said of him that he thinks. Whether someone was thinking in a particular situation is determined by his publicly observable behavior in the context of the situation, e.g., that he solves the problem or writes down the correct result to an arithmetic problem or gives the correct answer to a question or at least a reasonable one. There is no such thing as half a thought, though there is something like half a sentence. When someone silently talks to himself, when can one say that he has completed the thought? Just after he has finished the sentence? Does that mean he did not know what he was thinking before he finished the sentence? Did he perhaps finish the activity of thinking before he spoke to himself? But then where did the activity of thinking disappear to?

We also do not think in a particular natural language. Of course we sometimes say, “I have begun to think (and dream) in German” – but by this we just mean that we either speak to ourselves in German, or that we come up with the German words first to express our thoughts. But we do not mean that we first speak to ourselves in German and then translate it into our native language. Furthermore, thinking is not only not dependent on individual languages, but sometimes not even dependent on language in general. Much of what we call

---

<sup>7</sup> The remarks in this and the following paragraph are taken over from Hacker 2013, p. 391, 371ff.

<sup>8</sup> This goes against (false) commonplaces as they are still encountered in recent philosophical literature (cf. Elberfeld 2012, p. 15.)

“thinking” (in the sense of “problem solving” and in the sense of “believing”) is not linguistically structured at all. Toddlers and animals have beliefs about their environment and also can solve some problems. And, often, we think without words, i.e. without speaking to ourselves in our imagination. Of course, the only way to determine what a person thinks and what he thinks of and about, and how he solves a problem is to watch what he says and does. A being only thinks something determinate insofar as it is capable of displaying behavior in a way that allows the attribution of thinking to it. And, regarding higher forms of thinking, this behavior can only be a linguistic one. The limits of the meaningful attribution of thought are the limits of the array of forms of behavior that express thought (Hacker 2013, p. 392). And when it comes to higher forms of thinking, then this thinking can only be expressed through language. It cannot be said intelligibly of a dog that he is thinking about what he is going to get for Christmas in three months, whereas it could be said easily of a sufficiently old human being. That is because the latter is capable of displaying a linguistic (and non-linguistic) behavior that allows him the attribution of such thoughts to him.

To answer the question of whether there are insurmountable limits of translation: The meaning of linguistic expressions is constituted by the rules of its use. And this use must be publicly observable for potential speakers of a language. Since the use of language is intimately intertwined with the form of life, and the forms of life of members of other cultures never differ from ours to a certain extent, there are no fundamental limits to the understanding of members of other cultures. Due to the same physical constitution of human beings, we live in space and time, we basically deal with the same kinds of objects, we perceive the same qualities, we are involved in the same activities. We all have to eat, drink, sleep, we love to be comfortable, sometimes we are angry, sad, tired, funny, bored or anxious – just because we are human. We live in groups, love and hate certain things or people, sometimes we like to boast, feel pity or are ashamed sometimes. We have the same life goals on a general level: health, safety, prosperity, recognition. In short, our life forms are the same, so that we can – at least after sufficient time and in principle – learn what a stranger is talking about, what he says about it and what he derives from it or what he considers incompatible with it. We also can recognize whether the stranger makes an assertion or question, or affirms or denies something, gives an order, makes a promise, considers a possibility, or expresses a desire. There are no fundamental limits for learning a foreign language – just as there are no fundamental limits to the foreigner’s children when they learned their native language when growing up in the culture of their parents. If, on the other hand, the foreign form of life

deviates too much from ours, then we could not understand their language – but then we could hardly speak of a language at all.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> As in the case of lower animals or plants - here the talk of “language” or “communication” does not in fact denote language as an intentional activity but amounts to simple causal connections, for example the exchange of chemical substances or, in the case of technical devices, the exchange of electric impulses, which in turn can have causal effects. Sometimes we transpose these processes into the intentionalist vocabulary of communication, but it bears little resemblance to interpersonal communication and is a mere metaphorical way of speaking.

## References:

- Anscombe, E. (o. J.). *Private Ostensive Definition*, Studienbrief 03325 der FernUniversität in Hagen.
- Cassin, B. (2013). In Sprachen denken. *Trivium* 15. <http://trivium.revues.org/4730>. Zugegriffen: 24. November 2016.
- Elberfeld, R. (2012). *Sprache und Sprachen. Eine philosophische Grundorientierung*. Freiburg [u.a.]: Alber.
- Hacker, P. M. S. (2013). *The Intellectual Powers: A Study of Human Nature*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hare, R. M. (1993). A Reductio ad Absurdum of Descriptivism. In R. M. Hare (Hrsg.), *Essays in Ethical Theory* (S. 113-130). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Herder, Johann Gottfried (1985): *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, Wiesbaden: Fourier.
- Humboldt, W. v. (2010). *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*. In A. Flitner & K. Giel (Hrsg.), *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Werke in fünf Bänden* (Bd. 3). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Humboldt, W. v. (1820). Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung, in: Humboldt (2010) (S. 1-25).
- Humboldt, W. v. (1822). Ueber das Entstehen der grammatischen Formen und ihren Einfluss auf die Ideenentwicklung, in: Humboldt (2010) (S. 31-63).
- Humboldt, W. v. (1827-29): Ueber die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues, in: Humboldt (2010) (S. 144-367).
- Humboldt, W. v. (1830-35): Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts, in: Humboldt (2010) (S. 368-756).
- Locke, J. (2006). *Versuch über den menschlichen Verstand*, Bd. 2. Hamburg: Meiner.
- Quine, W. v. O. (1960). *Word and Object*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.
- Werlen, I. (2002). *Sprachliche Relativität. Eine problemorientierte Einführung*. Tübingen / Basel: UTB.
- Whorf, B. L. (1994). *Sprache – Denken – Wirklichkeit: Beiträge zur Metalinguistik und Sprachphilosophie*. Hrsg. v. P. Krausser. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.

- Wittgenstein, L. (1984). *Werkausgabe, Band 1: Tractatus logico-philosophicus / Tagebücher 1914-1916 / Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.