READING HUMBOLDT THROUGH THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION: THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

ED MCLUSKIE

ABSTRACT

Wilhelm von Humboldt's studies of language during the nineteenth century anticipated twentieth-century symbolic interactionism, suggesting a two-century intellectual history stressing the communicating subject as an intersubjective actor. Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, well known for its inclusion of George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, appeals in the same breath to von Humboldt's work, thus inviting a critical re-appropriation of Mead beyond the social-psychological realm, into macro-level analyses of cultural reproduction and societal evolution. Read as a project of cultural cultivation, the model of the conversation achieves the status of life-giver for language as such. This project reaches the level of state interests to maintain individual creativity in the company of others, to consider language an explicit project of social and cultural policy, and to develop concrete institutions of education in the interest of the emancipated citizen. However, this rearticulated symbolic interactionism faces theory-practice disparities in a weak legacy of educational diversity.

Ed McLuskie is Professor of Communication at Boise State University, email: emclusk@bigfoot.com.

Introduction

Relatively submerged conceptions in the history of communication studies often stand as an alternative set of perspectives on communication waiting to be mentioned and developed. Some provide a basis for more critical, more humanistic, lines of inquiry for the academy, its students, and others. Perhaps one day introductory textbooks for the general as well as specialist student will have abandoned the usual technical renditions of communication to create alternative histories of communication studies to include conceptions proposed here.

This essay recommends a reinterpretation of the symbolic interactionist perspective in communication studies not associated with George Herbert Mead, but with the early nineteenth-century German linguist-turned-philologist, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Humboldt contributed to an alternative theory of communication that would find its way into the "communication theory of society," also known as the "theory of communicative action," associated today with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Symbolic interactionism read via von Humboldt stresses connections between the life of individuals and nations as the story of the cultural and social evolution of the human species. Von Humboldt remade reason and language into an interactive practice of communication. This relocation was part of the Enlightenment project that in Germany made humanity responsible for truth, shifting the study of the words and forms of language to the workings of users considered as linguistic actors. Language was not to be treated as an object, as a work (*ergon*) for von Humboldt; instead, its work *was* its activity (*energeia*).

This move was a direct break with the logocentrism then dominating conceptions of language, which required, as Habermas (1998c, 408) puts it, "the *ontological* privileging of the world of entities, the *epistemological* privileging of contact with objects or existing state of affairs, and the *semantic* privileging of assertoric sentences and propositional truth." Humboldt's move away from conceptions of language as propositional vehicles for eternalised truths marked an effort to introduce the lifeworld and action into the study of language, charting a largely untapped line of intellectual history "that unites both von Humboldt and pragmatism with the later Wittgenstein and Austin" (1998c, 408). To tap that entire line within the perspective of the theory of communicative action remains an unfinished project for such a theory of communication. Here, I restrict myself to von Humboldt with the help of a few interpreters.

This essay also takes as its occasion that feature of the twentieth century that marked a critical appropriation in Europe and North America of American philosophical pragmatism and its intellectual cousin, symbolic interactionism. It remains today an important appropriation that sought to reveal the critical, sometimes political, potential of these intellectual movements as a framework for the theory of communication (e.g., Honneth and Joas 1991; Joas 1993; Taylor 1991). As attempts to recover a conception of society based on communication, they, too, are indebted to an even earlier time, specifically, the history of the German Enlightenment. By at least a century before symbolic interactionism, the work of philologist von Humboldt is an important predecessor. The conclusions of his studies of language-use in a variety of cultures became especially important for a communication theory of society that would predicate democratisation on recognising the emancipatory potential called forth in everyday communicative action.

This is, of course, an optimistic vision against what is by now a deep assumption that populations live through a vital but troubling dependency on taken-for-granted meanings, dimensions of culture reenacted through concrete acts of communication whereby the enculturated continue to enclave one another through society's preunderstandings. So "massive" is the preunderstanding for participants in communication that even attempts to overthrow such a bundle of background meanings would be an achievement that depends on lifeworld resources "not at their disposal" in the due course – in the usual course – of living together and discussing matters with each other (Habermas 1998d, 208-209). While flirtations with optimisms are suspect, the demands for grounding the idea of emancipation persist since the debate over modernity (Habermas 1987a). The author of the theory of communicative action, Jürgen Habermas, therefore, recommends re-charting intellectual history through von Humboldt's eyes as he takes Mead back in time and across the Atlantic for a bit of "corrective surgery" – not as a rescue operation for Mead, but for the idea of emancipation in critical theory. He takes von Humboldt's point that the individual's very existence depends on the other, that "I" and "You" reciprocally produce and reproduce one another once thought, language, and utterance become the web of human life (Habermas 2002, 227). In Mead's work, the dynamics occurred at social-psychological levels of individuation and socialisation that described developmental processes at the price of the part played by societal infrastructures at the macro level. It was this price that Habermas (1987b) had in mind when invoking Humboldt as the predecessor to Mead's articulation of intersubjectivity (1913).

Habermas considered von Humboldt to have provided the necessary, broader emphasis that would contextualise Mead's symbolic interactionism within an evolutionary perspective on society, in order to stress the necessity of intersubjective reciprocity for the survival and development of societies, as well as the species that lived in those societies. Other evolutionary perspectives would look to non-linguistic phenomena to emphasise what is decisive for the development of society. Von Humboldt's contribution, instead, was to render linguistic webs in a way that highlighted the sustaining and developing structures communication provides for society, thereby placing communication at the core of the evolution of society. For von Humboldt and subsequent, critical contributions to symbolic interactionism, language came to be seen as the most important evolutionary event for the human species.

Von Humboldt's contemporaries developed the idea that grammar in language defines animal development in general, refining that idea as a scientific pursuit. Their study of vocalisation as observable and patterned behaviour (Nowak 2000, 39) became one of the sources of the behavioural study of communication in the twentieth century (e.g., Birdwhistle 1952). Von Humboldt, however, emphasised the humanistic dimensions of grammar, in the mode of philology, incorporating an evolutionary theme that stressed the role of creativity and diversity as animators of linguistic development. Von Humboldt was convinced that the grammar inherent in human language enables us to "make infinite use of finite means" (as quoted in Nowak 2000, 39), and that this was the key – a communicational key – to the evolution of humanity and its possibilities.

Habermas's *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984; 1987b) situates the time-

line in a way that moves Mead's social-psychological development of self and society (1913; 1938; 1968) into more macro-based, evolutionary forms of theorising that stress the potential for a critical analysis of culture and society on the part of its members. As part of the communication-based theory of society, Habermas's resituating of Mead is also a manoeuvre designed to set up a critical tension on an evolutionary scale, where non-communicative forms of association and rationalisation frustrate the democratic potential that reinterpreters of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism (see, e.g., Dickstein 1998) recently have focused on. While discussions of non-communicative forms of social action are important for a dialectical-evolutionary account in the communication theory of society, the theory does not rely on von Humboldt. Accordingly, any extension of von Humboldt along such lines would be perhaps interesting but nevertheless more strained than following Habermas's strategy to confront symbolic interactionism with theories of rationalisation since Weber (that discussion is in Habermas 1987b); nevertheless, when addressing the political content implied by von Humboldt's theory of language and communication, the occasional speculation in a more dialectical direction arises.

The major focus, however, is von Humboldt's articulation of intersubjectivity as the reciprocity of mutuality, as seen through the perspective of the theory of communicative action, contributing to a re-reading of the field's intellectual history to reveal its critical intent. To follow the legacy of the theory of communicative action is to interpret and explain the social order as an interactive constellation of cooperation involving commitment, trustworthiness and responsibility. Such an approach to communication opposes accounts of social order that read "communication" as a bundle of strategic-technical processes vested in "strategically acting subjects" as the animating force of communication – in, for example, "models grounded in decision or game theory" (Cooke 1998, 5). In the "context-transcendent potential of the validity claims raised in everyday communicative processes," the theory of communicative action provides a standard for critique: the "potential already built into everyday communicative action," where "reason in everyday life" operates through concrete, intersubjective subjects who can, alongside philosophers and specialists, actively interrogate ideas of and claims to truth and justice. They are able to question from their practical position in society using "idealizing suppositions of recognition and reciprocity" that are excluded from strategic theories. According to the theory of communicative action, "everyday human activity" expresses a communicative rationality that "is not reducible to the standards of validity prevailing in any local context of communicative activity," but reserves *as a practical and guiding principle* of daily life "idealizing suppositions" for "criticizing local practices of justification" as an "alternative to traditional conceptions of truth and justice" (Cooke 1998, 5). These contours of the communication theory of society were developed in von Humboldt's theory of language through comparative linguistic research, which showed regularities but not ontological truths about the nature of language. His work probably led Habermas to assign to communication the degree of empirical confidence sought for truth claims by the Enlightenment.

Von Humboldt's General Perspective on Communication

One way to locate von Humboldt's work in communication is to remember that the history of communication often figures into the general story of the history of civilisations. Indeed, when the field of communication studies has looked to so-called "alternative perspectives," the history of civilisation frequently is difficult to read apart from matters intimately tied to communication. For example, even Berelson (1959), critically representing perhaps the height of the behavioural heyday in media effects studies, recognised the so-called "Canadian" alternative that stressed the creation of civilisations through alterations in communication technologies (especially, the work of Innis 1950, 1964). When attention shifted to those experiencing civilisation, early proponents of what would become known as the "cultural studies" perspectives straddled the English-speaking Atlantic to find through, e.g., Hall (1979) the role of culture in the formation of society in the works of Williams (1966) and Havelock (1963; 1986); or, on the United States side, through Hardt (1989; 1998) and Carey (1989), the literally vital role of culture in socialization (Mead 1968) and its links to democratisation (Dewey 1939; 1966) as dimensions of actual lives produced in and through modernisation. Civilisation thus appears as communicatively understood as accomplishments within and by societies through the collective activities of their members, activities mediated by technology, history, and networks. In these general terms, then, von Humboldt can be located.

Surrounded by encyclopaedic efforts to map territories of all kinds – biological in the case of Darwin, or the linguistic universes of his predecessors and contemporaries – von Humboldt was one of the first to break with the static formalisms current in the analysis of language. His signature in this break was the model of intersubjectivity, or the model of "the conversation." This perspective on communication was articulated through the details of concrete linguistic practices rather than abstract linguistic grammars; he pursued the details by observing on several continents primitive through advanced cultures. His conclusion – that the conversation was the centre of language – created a new starting point for the study of human experience: connectedness as an *accomplishment* of human beings from one encounter to the next, from one generation to the next, in an evolution of culture that would always depend on that situated encounter of grasping for comprehension of the other. No longer were people passive receptors for language or the worlds their languages spoke. He provided an early challenge to the Cartesian view of language (explicit in von Humboldt 1830/1968;1999b), specifically against the notion that language is the artefact of thought's innate categories. Von Humboldt's attempts to demonstrate empirically that language emerges out of communicative interaction provided the basis for what Grice (1957) would later call the consequence of continuous cooperation among interlocutors (see Strecker 2001).

When describing diversity in nations, von Humboldt (1993; 1999a) proposes the idea of reality as an unfinished project that persists through the individuating dimensions of socialisation. The notion that reality is an unfinished project is expressed in accounts of societal transition, when linguistic communities coalesce into nations and then creatively transform their development without giving up individuality. The communication theory of society invokes this von Humboldtian

reading not only as an explicit contributor to the idea that "communicative actions involve shared presuppositions," nor only that "communicative forms of life are interwoven with relations of reciprocal recognition" (Habermas 1998a, 40), but also as a theoretical perspective pointing beyond the empirically given and the historical moment to conceptions of the cultural cultivation of nations aspiring to the recognition of diversity in human experience. This reading is suggested by Habermas's claim that "a communication-theoretical concept of society" must include a shared lifeworld that "(von) Humboldt already understood [as] linkages for interaction," connections that are more than mere instruments for "action coordination and social integration," but are also interactive media "of socialization ... through which cultural traditions continue to be handed down. Language, world view and form of life are interwoven" thanks to von Humboldt's analysis (Habermas 1998a, 40).

This line of reasoning is muted in the literature of communication and requires further attention from the perspective of Habermas's communication theory. Habermas urges von Humboldt's conceptions of interaction as an important occasion to reinterpret Meadean symbolic interactionism in the direction of a democratically informed theory of communication that highlights the necessity of both diversity and socialisation as society's evolving project of cultural cultivation. This alone is a significant shift for the symbolic interactionist position in communication studies. The political character of communication as social interaction cannot be avoided.

According to Burrow, the "political Humboldt" is often recognised in the history of political ideas through a single sentence (1993, xvii). The sentence appears in a better-known book's epitaph, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*: "The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity" (von Humboldt quoted by Mill 1909). This theme of diversity, however, is better able to highlight the political dimension if we consider von Humboldt to have provided a foundation for regarding interaction as an *evolutionary struggle* for recognition and for an institutionalised space that cultivates community. When language is seen for its inherent and necessary valuing of mutuality and commonality, communication appears as an aspiration for cultivating democratic practices, leading Habermas a century later to regard "communication" as the formal-pragmatic demand in communication for a democratic society. Communication as aspiration has intersubjectively acting subjects standing beyond "the limits of state action," as von Humboldt (1993) put it, in order to supply the innovative meanings by which society continues to mature. In this respect, von Humboldt is part of a European tradition that makes communication central and vital for the evolution of the species and the societies it creates. It is an aspiration for a counterfactual present that means, for the present, an emphasis on struggle.

To think of communication as struggle seems wrong when it appears that communication is merely a glance away, an utterance heard, a web page grabbed, a channel tuned in, or, now, manuscript read. Indeed, communication seems often an easy choice from a prodigious cafeteria for engagement, so ubiquitous that its invitations and forms seem "natural." We may even think it the fault of individuals that, when communication "fails," it is due to their failure to use society's provisions for a range of allegedly "communicative" experiences. From the mass-medi-

ated and virtual varieties to the intimate, where everywhere experts in the popular culture and the academy promise whatever meaning seems to be missing, opportunities to "communicate" seem abundant on a global scale. And that, it turns out, is the screen through which we must read intellectual history today. It is not difficult to mistake the alleged variety of the information cafeteria for the variety of participants, to regard "national conversations" managed by network news anchors and pollsters as the site of the actual formation of public conversations and deliberations, to mistake, in short, the label "conversation" for its practice.

Von Humboldt's intellectual move was to put the conversation at the centre of the languages people throughout society use. Yet we can easily skew our reading of any theory of intersubjectivity in a world of thin but pervasive choices, where, in a Marcusian extension of comfortable domination (Marcuse 1964), commodified variety replaces genuine engagement and participation, where communication at the societal level loses its political functions as public opinion plays the singular but weakening role of legitimising power. Against such a background, choices make themselves available for the academy to map "reality" as though it were an accomplished fact rather than an unfinished project, a tendency of theories and conceptions of "communication" that reduce the connectedness of people to information flows. Such reductions encourage the confusion of "communication" with a cafeteria of information choices, in turn encouraging the treatment of complex social problems through models of individual behaviour. Consequently, a-political, island-like private spheres are normalised, and meaning is entirely up to those able to proceed on their own in a world where meaning, though neither information nor expertise, remains a scarce resource, "becoming even scarcer" (Habermas 1975). Von Humboldt's work enters this critique highlighting a vibrant private realm in linguistic terms that would counter despair over meaning, providing an optimistic foundation for the communication theory of society. He emphasises the importance of the ongoing, existentially intersubjective conversation for the life and development of nations. His linguistic theory, then, is one source of alternative perspectives for developing theories of communication that refuse to reduce meaning to mere information.

Von Humboldt saw communication both as what people do and a project of what they could alternatively do. Language was a project and purveyor of the imagination, encouraged by the German Enlightenment through which Humboldt joined celebrations of the imagination and the creative power of a communal individual. Such an individual was the product of *Bildung*, that interpretive reach into the unification of the inner self and community that drove Gadamer's hermeneutics and which von Humboldt "elevates" and deploys "as an ethical beacon" that rendered language and communication as performances of "a social role by exemplarity" (Arthos 2000, 27). As von Humboldt puts it, each individual has "certain parts which concern only himself and his accidental existence. . . . But there is also a part which constitutes his connectedness with whatever idea or archetype is best expressed through him in particular, that of which he is the symbol" (1963, 396), a symbol beyond as well as in the present. Communication preserves this idealising dimension of everyday life in order to alter the realities of everyday life. Members of society enjoy uniqueness in their commonality, creating an everyday condition of variety that requires regular conversation, and cultivating, when na-

tions come into existence, partisanships for different versions and visions of social experience and social organisation. As they aspire to a better society, their media of association – the varied languages of the species – permit thoughts, feelings, and ideas to be shared and make a difference toward collective ends. It would take the introduction of an imaginative concept to hold these tensions – variety and community, e.g. – in view.

The vernacular, conversation with family, friends and strangers, artistic expression, and the sharing of information in the public square revealed to von Humboldt the inevitability of connection in variety in the languages of the species. Nowhere was the individual fully alone. But the individual was not elevated beyond his individuality with ease, especially with the advent of states. The link from self to other required the commonalities only nations could provide, even at the level of language. Through the "rising up to humanity through culture" (Gadamer 1993, 10), *Bildung* was the means by which states formed and were formed by the "recognition of oneself in another being" (Gadamer 1993, 13), analyzed in a line from von Humboldt through Hegel (Arthos 2000, 29). Unlike Gadamer, whose conception risked falling into an absolute subjectivity, or Hegel, whose conception risked eclipsing the individual in history's "rising to the universal," von Humboldt's conception of *Bildung* saw the self preserved in the empirically observable phenomenon of all languages: language is tied to speech acts that, due to linguistic variations in all societies, in turn require imaginative, hermeneutic acts of comprehension. Von Humboldt also observed orders of interpretation grounded in the linguistic inventions known grammatically as personal pronouns. From those linguistic achievements imaginative interpretation must always have come from the "other" as well as "I," "Thou," and "We." The struggle for recognition came to be seen as an actual accomplishment, reaching consummation daily, in the interest of all dimensions of intersubjectivity. Humboldt's analyses of grammars and parts of speech returned frequently to the point that the conversation, or the utterance reciprocated, in the language of all peoples. "Other," "I," "Thou," and "We" describe the respective progression from objectification, subjectification, mutuality, and commonality. Quasi-universal in form (as in grammar), diverse and fluid in experience because of a requirement of conversational renewal, linguistic life became a key basis for Humboldt's vision of state policy for the cultivation of societies of mutual recognition.

These linguistic-conversational practices would become marginalised in the private realm, according to Habermas's thesis of lifeworld colonisation (Habermas 1984); in the public realm, where they took the form of deliberation and debate, they would define the public realm as suppressed participation (Habermas 1991a). As occasions for critical projects within communication studies, the history of human experience becomes a warrant to theoretically politicise the idea of communication itself. That is what the Humboldtian legacy has come to face. Although von Humboldt himself did not anticipate these implications of the mutuality of conversation, his requirement that all language is central to all societies nevertheless anticipates these consequences. The systematic suppression societies can exert on the Humboldtian vision of the creative power of communication suggests an optimistic blind spot that Humboldt shares with Mead, regardless of von Humboldt's more evolution-based location for socialisation processes.

Though von Humboldt and Mead share a premature optimism, they part ways on the incorporation of the counterfactual in experience. Von Humboldt takes interaction into the role of the imagination as a collective extension beyond the constraints of its past and present circumstances, to fashion alternative futures in the most concrete of ways, as the formalisation of languages already well-spoken. This means that communication theory as symbolic interactionism must consider reality at least as an unfinished project, but also as a project that articulates counterfactual ideals as much as unfolded facts in nature. Like the early proponents of historicism (e.g., Vico 1968), von Humboldt would make much of the ever-present linguistic practice of creative interpretation in the absence of readily fixed or provided meanings – in nature, by the community or through state action.

Locating von Humboldt Philosophically and Theoretically

Of great interest in the search for alternative perspectives of communication might be perspectives that were grounded in the philosophical break with First Philosophy (*Ursprungsphilosophie*). Such breaks tended to connect philosophy to historical processes throughout modernity, often as social philosophy. By the twentieth century, even in the midst of the progressive dominance of positivism and behaviourism, this emancipatory impulse persisted in intellectual life, continuing and developing theories of society in a range from American philosophical pragmatism to German critical theory emanating from Frankfurt through French poststructuralism. All continued the practice of the break, in the interest of wresting the present from rigid pasts. The break with First Philosophy, then, launched an emancipatory theme (cf. Habermas 1971) that would in theories of society and social theories place the acting, human subject at the centre of philosophical analysis. Gone was the privileged vantage point from which to view original causes. As von Humboldt wrote, "the primitive formation of the truly original language" and the "secondary formation of later ones" always are "to us inexplicable, precisely in respect of their actual gestation. All becoming in nature, but especially of the organic and living, escapes our observation" (1999b, 43).

Von Humboldt was one of the first to abandon efforts to find the origins of language or first causes of its morphology. Whether "man's inmost nature" is produced or produces the nature of humanity and human aspirations ignores the fact of simultaneity and mutuality that arise and reach "the inaccessible depths of the mind" (1999b, 42). Von Humboldt stressed instead a developmental perspective without recourse to origins. In the place of origins, language developed as historical continuities that always provided a starting point for research. In this respect, as well as in the abandonment of the search for first causes, von Humboldt anticipated the pragmatists, who took the matter in the direction of consequences tied to imaginative, but also always necessarily routinised action.

Von Humboldt was in his thirties when Kant died, and was keenly aware of Kant's famous aphorism for modern social philosophy, an aphorism that locates von Humboldt's position substantively: to paraphrase, act according to the principle that you would *like* to become a universal law (Kant 1949). The nature of "the good" and "the true" became contingent on human aspirations, generating a line of critical-intellectual appropriations which continues to pose the fundamental decision whether to study "the social" in order to conform to its "nature," or make

the social conform to our demonstrably better ideas in the best of cases, our imposed utopias in the worst. Kant's aphorism survived Hegel's critique on that score, now more decisively turned in the direction of the history of societies, rather than in the direction of the history of philosophical ideas. When Marx made the turn from the philosophical to the social (Marx 1973), what survived all other differences were at least these two points: first, reality is not what is in front of us as much as it is behind our backs; second, what lies in front of us is an as-yet counterfactual reality that we articulate and wrest from the weight of history with the aid of counterfactual ideals.

That backgrounding locates von Humboldt's perspective as a way to correct an unproblematised naturalism in symbolic interactionist foundations of communication theory. Rather than end the theory of communication there, von Humboldt, as is well known, designed the Prussian educational system and established the University of Berlin. This reflected the extension of his work on language (e.g., Humboldt 1973, 1997, 1999b), as the restructuring the communicative infrastructure of society – a *Bildungsprojekt* (cf. Bruford 1975; Flitner 2002; Valls 1999). This "policy dimension" of von Humboldt's research on language marked the significant cultural turn within this nineteenth-century linguistic turn, to focus on the role of language in cultural reproduction (cf. Sorkin 1983).

Once von Humboldt's interactionist theory is seen as connected to practices of cultural reproduction as a way to change society, what would later be known as "symbolic interactionism" stood ready to be interpreted more politically (as in, e.g., Joas 1993; McCarthy, Rehg, and Bohman 2001). However interpreted, von Humboldt's idea of communication would inevitably speak to the relation of the individual, as a citizen, to the state (Humboldt 1993), as does Habermas's communication theory of society in various iterations (Habermas 1970; 1979; 1995; Habermas, Cronin, and De Greiff 1998; Habermas, Marcuse, Lubasz, and Spengler 1978).

Von Humboldt can be read, then, along several lines, three of which are emphasised for consideration. All, except the third, imply a democratic impulse in von Humboldt's work, the first two, so to speak, at the ground floor of symbolic interaction: (1) his *contribution to the theory of language*; (2) the *requirement of mutual recognition and diversity*; and (3) the opportunity for *cultivating infrastructures of communication*, the linguistic incubators of cultural reproduction.

Von Humboldt's Contribution to the Theory of Language

For von Humboldt, language is "the animating breath," the "formative power … in the act of altering the world" (Humboldt 1999b, 44). Von Humboldt's "theory of language as both mental and social action was [the] most thoroughly developed" among similar attempts by his contemporaries (e.g., Bernhardi 1973; Hamann 1967; Herder 1993; Schlegel 1973). Between 1780 and 1830, they developed the idea of the utterance as the animator of language (Esterhammer 2000a, 553) and the key to the nature of all human societies. Their work constituted perhaps the earliest of modern linguistic turns for philosophy, a phenomenon usually pegged to the century following von Humboldt (e.g., Rorty 1992; Wellmer 1974). Von Humboldt's work was part of a wider intellectual movement that challenged traditional conceptions of the purpose of language as well: the neutral communicator

of truth. Such a challenge called into question the analysis of language as a mere transmitter of tradition, that disembodied vehicle for thought confined to the discovery of the external and eternal (as in the positivist manifesto by Schlick 1959), protests to such conceptions of language notwithstanding (Apel 1967). Such questioning reframed the purpose of language, in a way that supported Enlightenment challenges to dogma and its social cousins, tradition and authority. British linguistic philosophy would focus on the act of promising, that interpersonal speech act that Esterhammer (2000b) and Land (1986) trace to the idea of the social contract in the tradition of Locke and Hobbes, setting the stage for speech-act theorists like Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Against that background, the promise becomes the "paradigmatic performative utterance" (Esterhammer 2000a, 553) for communication studies based in speech act theory.

Von Humboldt often emphasised interpersonal dimensions of language as a key scene of action, directing the attention of linguists to the transactions occurring in everyday communication. This orientation led to the idea of the "speech act" as a prominent perspective in philosophy and communication theory. Known in linguistics as "linguistic pragmatics" (Esterhammer 2000a, 553), it identified social action with communicative performances. This was a *desideratum* of von Humboldt's research, a life-long project that would reorient linguistics to everyday, necessary performances of grammars, performances that had pragmatic consequences. The very idea of grammar as performance was significant. The structuring of meaning through varied grammars became a central Humboldtian theme, which took as its research focus the reproduction of aspirations through concrete speakers and hearers. It was theirs, not only Kant's, formal demand that as-yet unrealised ideas were a feature of the concrete affairs that define everyday experience. This dimension would suggest a rereading of the pragmatic (Joas 1993) and symbolic interactionist (Aboulafia 2001) traditions over a century later.

Most of von Humboldt's work on language consists of case studies of diverse world languages. This essay, instead, emphasises his conclusions inflected through his theoretical position, as a basis for understanding communication as a theory of society. From the standpoint of inquiry as a methodological practice, however, it is important to note that von Humboldt viewed his research as a reconstructive science – not engaged in the search for causes nor predictions so much as reading history as a series of developments that spell out a range of possible futures that people, not nature, would make. Von Humboldt saw language progressing from the relatively more basic forms of speech to the more formalised speech acts and writing, not in a chain of causes and effects, but through the mutuality of speech and thought. Language always requires interaction because it "leaves the listener to understand and connect the forms which link the speech together" (Humboldt 1997, 43). But interaction, through speech, requires thought as well. "Speech," he wrote, "is directly concerned with the denotation of things," while thought "is concerned with form," the "ideal" that beckons speech to move beyond the "material and the consequence of actual need." For Humboldt, reason plays an ever-present role in the progressive formality of language that "heightens the capacity for thought" in the performance of speech acts (1997, 43).

Von Humboldt's linguistic theory became a basis for the theory of communicative action which, as a communication theory of society, stresses the progressive

and the emancipatory. The fact that von Humboldt lived from 1767-1835, in an age that optimistically viewed reason and science as progressive and emancipatory, encouraged an evolutionary outlook into the nineteenth-century concern with comparative philology in linguistics. Von Humboldt's contributions follow this path to encompass themes of diversity as well as of commonality. Today, the theory of communicative action inherits this tension, a tension that for von Humboldt defined his frameworks for language as a dialectical way out of the ancient dichotomies between universals and particulars, civilisations vs. the uncivilised, societies vs. individuals. His was an optimistic account of progressive cultivation through communication in which individuals can realise a free and self-conscious interplay of reason and reflection and build the humane state. Debatable as these notions may be, given the time during which they were developed, we find a basis for a communicative understanding of the development of civilisation in von Humboldt's work on language through comparative philology. Inspired by evolutionary accounts current in his day, von Humboldt, too, was interested in the history of species. Clearly, Darwin's work was replayed through studies of animal communication – attention to varieties in, for example, the warning or territorial calls of bird songs treated as developmental variations on a theme, or the notion of the analogue signal exemplified by the honeybee's dance transmitting information on food sources (Nowak 2000, 39).

But his was also a time that had seen the success of the separation of language from actors. "With the decline of rhetoric," Tyler (1978, 167) comments, "meaning was separated from the speech event, and the notion of speech or speaking subordinated to the idea of language. Meaning by the seventeenth century had become almost entirely a property of words rather than deeds." It was an old issue dressed up in new terms. During the Renaissance, language was divinely ordained, the gift from God. It was later inflected as a fact of Nature. Studies of language prior to the Enlightenment tended to pursue the origins of words in relation to the things they named, rather than to pursue varieties of human interactions that defined the nature of language. Von Humboldt would work to rectify both obsessions, which emphasised the word to the exclusion of the speakers. His most controversial move was to resituate language as an embedded production within the interactive practices of speakers of vernaculars, rather than to have them arrive, so to speak, from the outside. While his contemporaries treated language as a re-presentation of the world (worldly or otherwise) von Humboldt's efforts describe even representational aspects of language as uses humanly created. He required conceptions of practical human associations to re-inflect even representation as the inheritance of creative responses to the specific necessities of social communication. Von Humboldt, in other words, developed his perspective on language and communication as part of a re-centring of knowledge and its expression within a world that is humanly produced. While his perspective was reformist, his shift to a humanly produced linguistic world was radical. It was a shift that would become a fundamental prerequisite for any study of "the social." No longer in "the mind of God," language at the very least would be seen as a tool that makes reasoned inquiry possible.

Some have noted that Habermas's conception of language is a virtual replica of von Humboldt's. Habermas especially credits Taylor (1991) with an accurate account of "my concept of language ... from the perspective of Humboldt's philoso-

phy of language," and agrees that there is of a line of development in the history of ideas from von Humboldt to the "distinction between the structure of language ... and the practice of language" reflected in "more recent theories of language (*langue* vs. *parole*, linguistic competence vs. linguistic performance)." But Habermas reads more into von Humboldt than does Taylor, especially von Humboldt's implied but sometimes explicit critique of the overly formal versus flexible conceptions of language, or grammar vs. speech, for example. The communication theory of society would on this account alert us to a blind spot in linguistic analysis: the failure to see "conversation as the crux of language." This is the decisive dimension of language for von Humboldt, the dimension that makes possible "the intersubjectivity of possible understanding" often missed by linguists otherwise influenced by Humboldt (Habermas 1991b, 215).

Von Humboldt clearly would have objected to conceptions of communication that claimed to observe its most significant developments while they are underway. Like many of his Enlightenment contemporaries, he was suspicious of claims to an observer's standpoint from which to describe and explain the origins of language. "If we speak of original languages," he wrote, "they are so merely for our lack of knowledge of their earlier components" (1999a, 43). It was more reasonable to consider language as a world-view, as "a linkage of thoughts" that "always necessarily rests upon the collective power of man; nothing can be excluded from [language], since it embraces everything" (1999a, 44). He also would have objected to conceptions of communication that failed to address a scale that spanned individual to societal transformation. Routinely he argued that language "is related to everything therein, to the whole as to the individual, and nothing of this ever is, or remains, alien" (1999a, 43). Finally, he would have objected to any conception of communication that bore the signs of passivity. Language is "not merely passive, receiving impressions, but follows from the infinite multiplicity of possible intellectual tendencies in a given individual, and modifies by inner selectivity every external influence exerted upon it" (1999a, 43).

The Requirement of Mutual Recognition and Diversity

Reading von Humboldt is almost like reading Mead when the "I" and the "You" are described as discussions, precluding conceptions of separate individuals in favour of *intersubjective* subjects. For theorising language, this meant an emphasis on the *use and life* of language that would presume each subject's power of thought in the definition of self and other. The conversationally intersubjective "You" inevitably tries to understand the "I." Language is the symbolic medium for the ever-emerging and sometimes creative work of individual minds connected through their respective interpreting of each other while, at the same time, reinterpreting their cultural heritage as they continuously make it their own.

Von Humboldt starts from the fact that speech is central to the formation of consciousness and the self, that "it is only through others that the self reveals itself and comes to know itself as something more than an object" (as quoted in Tyler 1978, 141). Von Humboldt learned in his studies that proper names are always and necessarily incomplete. Biographies fade into inaccessible reaches of times past to join a mythic world of ancestors. Moreover, they are busy moving toward not fully knowable futures. Into this, children are born to spend a lifetime learning the mean-

ings of proper names, including their own (cf. Tyler, 1978). The demand for continuous contact was inescapable for Humboldt upon discerning such features of language, features that taught the incompleteness of language.

Von Humboldt regarded language to be at once "the work of nations" and "the self-creations of individuals." Language is "produced solely in each individual, but only in such fashion that each presupposes the understanding of all." To this theme of intersubjectivity von Humboldt adds the important claim that mutual understanding is in principle and in practice an "expectation" inherent in all linguistic practices (1999a, 43). This introduction of reciprocal expectations oriented toward intersubjective understanding was to be made much of a century later by Habermas (1984; 1987b; 1998b) in his formal pragmatics of communication, especially in the concept of practical discourse. Von Humboldt consistently concluded that "every significant activity of the [individual] belongs" always to a degree to "the mass surrounding him" (1999a, 42). There could be no such thing as the isolated individual – not fully, at least.

From the concept of the intersubjective individual, von Humboldt moves to the question of equality. He treats it as a dimension of freedom that "can be achieved only in the varieties of the spirit, and manifold ways in which human individuality can assert itself." This produces diversity as a regular feature of language, and an unknowable quality to the development of culture and society. Whatever may be "universally striven for" is tied "unconditionally" to the fact of diversity (1999a, 42). Theorists of language and of communication often underestimate the dependency of the generalisable on the unalterably unique. In this case, von Humboldt established a sphere for the individual imagination as an irreducible and irreplaceable dimension of communication from which could spring the impulse toward a state and society beyond the available present. It was perhaps this tenacity of this imaginative sphere that, because it was seen to be reproduced throughout everyday languages, led Habermas to reorient critical theory in the direction of a quasi-natural appeal to the emancipatory potential of everyday communicative actions. Individuality is preserved with the claim that languages "are also mental creations which in no way whatever pass out from a single individual to the remainder, but can only emanate from the simultaneous self-activity of all. In languages, therefore, since they always have a national form, nations, as such, are truly and immediately creative" (Humboldt 1999a, 42).

Von Humboldt also saw nations and individuals as ultimately reconcilable – that the state depended on the linguistic performances of connected individuals. The "efficacy of individuals [is] only incisive and enduring to the degree in which they have been simultaneously carried up by the spirit residing in their nation, and are able in turn to impart new impetus" to that nation (1999a, 41). The theory of communicative action once used a similar point to explain why advanced capitalist societies require regular supplies of legitimation (Habermas, 1975). Even the state, the nation, depended on a "connection of the individual with a whole," von Humboldt argued, a connection that "is too important a point in the spiritual economy of mankind." Their unity invariably also "evokes a simultaneous separation" that is primarily historically based; "still, every nation, quite apart from its external situation, can and must be regarded as a human individuality, which issues an inner spiritual oath of its own" (1999a, 41).

The idea of democracy has earned the status of something like the philosopher's categorical imperative, an ethical imperative that took a communicative turn from von Humboldt (1993) through Dewey (1954) and Mead (1913). The idea of mutual recognition and its basic inevitability was von Humboldt's linguistic seed to this communicative ethic. It grew in the form of education for communicative competence, understood as the cultivation of societal infrastructures for communication.

Cultivating Infrastructures of Communication

When von Humboldt moved into the realm of social policy, it took the form of cultural cultivation. There, he became well-known early in the nineteenth century for creating the Prussian educational policy that separated students at age ten into three distinct school types, one of them, the Gymnasium, permitting access to a university education. These were the elect class that would realise through contemplation their connections with the nation and its members. As is also well-known, von Humboldt founded in 1809 a university (in Berlin) that now bears his name, a model "modern university," combining research with broad education (Koenig 2001, 819). In spite of the fact that Hegel and Marx, among others notable, held posts there, von Humboldt's vision of education, and especially of the university, was implemented as a project for the select few. They engaged in education for personal improvement through the realisation in each individual of the highest ideal of humanity – a tradition one can trace back to Socrates. This ideal of education for living was not a particularly political ideal. But it had political implications to be realised a century later.

The university stressed the cultivation of literature and the arts in von Humboldt's day. He expressed something of a formula: "To contemplate the humanity in oneself, and having once found it, never to turn one's eyes away from it, that is the only sure means of never straying from its sacred ground ... . Behavior [of others towards me] that is truly humane creates in me the clear consciousness of humanity, and this consciousness allows of no behavior but what is worthy of humanity" (1963, 73). It united those privileged to the university into a larger community by retreating into themselves, creating something of a performative contradiction to Humboldt's themes of intersubjectivity. The disparity between the theory and the practice of Humboldt's theory of communicative interaction probably explains why the theory of communicative action leaves von Humboldt behind precisely when the pregnant theme of participatory democracy goes ironically private, where, if intersubjectivity still has a name, it is the intersubjectivity of the privileged that is, in spite of its privilege, enclaved nevertheless.

Critical theory, the home of the communication theory of society, specialised in the seeds of domination planted within the very conception of freedom. It would, therefore, be sensitive to the undemocratic themes in the Humboldtian move from linguistic and communicative interaction to, in effect, the communicative practices of education policy. Perhaps the fair conclusion to draw is that von Humboldt can indeed be used as a source for a broadened and generally democratic conception of symbolic interaction; and perhaps his linguistic theory can be used to ground the theory of communicative action in an evolutionary and quasi-natural fashion; but the theory of communicative action would need to look elsewhere – perhaps

to John Dewey (1966) – for an attempt to connect communication with democracy through educational reform. More generally, the theory of communicative action still requires an articulation of interventions into the institutions of cultural cultivation – a direction pointed to when one argues that both individual and state form the symbolic interactions by which we are cultivated.

Conclusion

So much has occurred with the twentieth century's "linguistic turns" that von Humboldt's perspective needs to be included as a reminder and as a corrective. Positivist-inspired adherents of universal languages ignored the need for conversations with research partners (Apel 1972). Symbolic interactionists who settled for no more than the social-psychological level found themselves in cul-de-sacs of culture where textualised versions of pragmatism failed to rescue whatever political aspirations constructivists intended (Agger 1981, 1992). This essay has recommended that symbolic interactionism take its cue from von Humboldt in order to take the societal role of variety seriously enough to see our commonality as an evolutionary project, while continuing to argue against ideas of fixed meanings in communication. This essay also recommends that symbolic interactionism, in its linkages with cultural studies, move beyond the point of the reproduction of meanings to an analysis of the more profoundly concrete struggles to accomplish comprehension, reciprocity, and commonality in a world that can never be fully spoken, especially world's aspired to. To fund the idea of communication away from the presumption that we live in worlds that can never fully be told is the stuff of counterfactual ideals guiding action, a theme inviting a return to von Humboldt. At the very least von Humboldt's conception of communication reminds us of the requirement of conversation for anyone, in any location, in any time. In the conversation, the ideal of democracy germinates.

The distance between language and communication is sometimes vast, sometimes so minuscule that the terms are synonymous. Von Humboldt's work establishes the link on the model of conversation to make the intersubjective subject irreducible on the requirements of language and capable of rational action in the ever-present need to enact those requirements. To theorise communication from such a starting point would be a unifying counterpoint to specious theories that encourage the study of strategies and tactics in an anonymous world of information flows. The action dimension of language often fades from view, not exactly as it did for von Humboldt, but as it did in any event, to spur an interactive theory of language with actual participants in the fray. One recommendation here – to refuse conceptions of the isolated communicating subject *or* object – could form a richer, more textured, and more humane constellation of ideas from which to develop theories, research, and practices.

The theory of communicative action as a communication theory of society makes much of the conversation as the irreducible practice of communicating partners. Especially in the need for mutual recognition and reciprocity, the linguistic and communicative seed is planted for a perspective on democracy that treats actual participation as the guiding principle of the political sphere. Today, that requirement, which has evolved from the "ideal speech situation" (Habermas 1979) to proposals that states insure procedures of reciprocity (Habermas 1996), highlights

the fact that democracy, too, is an unfinished project whose experiment has yet to be run.

One does not, of course, need to accept the intellectual program of the theory of communicative action in order to read von Humboldt's version of the linguistic turn in and for philosophy and social theory, nor to create an alternative intellectual history for communication studies. And it would be difficult to find support in his work for a participatory perspective on democracy were it not for the implications of his treatment of the conversation: the concept "*Bildung*" simply does not require it, and the elitist overtones of his educational reforms may well call for another form of social organisation – in spite of his thesis that state action is limited.

But perhaps we can agree that, whenever "the individual" enters into our conceptual mix, she shall require another – a co-subject – in the expectation of reciprocal recognition and the mutual expectation of understanding one another. Perhaps we could even further agree that, once our concepts have such actors in view, only then is it possible to develop a theory of communication.

Perhaps not. Von Humboldt offered a rationale for the study of communication as a world-historical anthropology. He argued that the study of communication be regarded as a philosophical anthropology as well, in order to highlight possibilities as well as histories already made. For the history of ideas of communication, he was in this respect something of an originator. He placed the human subject as an intersubjective subject at the centre of theory and of history. It is an idea that remains on the margins. Similar efforts to locate the subject and the intersubjective subject appear today as alternatives to a kind of bankruptcy of the idea of communication at the hands of market-inspired behavioural science, a story only too-well known at least since the 1970s. With no sign, it seems, of shifting the field to the communicating subject as its basis for theory and research, it is important to remember that von Humboldt's work today is another perspective in the realm of alternatives located in the margins of communication theory, alongside critical and cultural approaches to communication and society (cf. Hardt 1992) whose future is in doubt. In this respect, it is timely to recover earlier perspectives like von Humboldt's, if only, for now, to keep alive the counterpoint.

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