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GOETHE AND WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This paper discusses homologies in thought from Johann Wolfgang Goethe to Wilhelm von Humboldt. My aim is to show how similarities in thought between them are not mere coincidences but arise from Goethe's immediate influence on Humboldt. The paper discusses Goethe's methodological concept of *Urform*, and in particular examines his idea of *Urpflanze* in his botanical studies, as well as the nature of the relationship between Goethe and Humboldt. It examines Humboldt's *form of language* and presents homologies in thought from Goethe to Humboldt by performing an analysis of Humboldt's methodological approaches to his objects of study. It shows how his analysis relates, in part, to the Goethean method of examining how individual organisms follow fundamental principles found in their universal forms.

Keywords: Goethe; Wilhelm von Humboldt; Urform; Urpflanze; form of language.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe's (1749–1832) influence appears to be present in homologies of thought found in Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1767–1835) philosophy of language revealed through several observations that establish the climate of opinion they created through their lifelong friendship. The aim of this essay is to show how similarities in thought between them are not mere coincidences but arise from Goethe's immediate influence on Humboldt. It begins with an examination of Goethe's methodological concept of *Urform*. In particular, Section 1 analyses one of the ways this fundamental methodology took shape through the concept of *Urpflanze* in his botanical studies. The idea of *Urpflanze* fermented in his thinking in the late 1780s, specifically with his sweeping trip from Northern to Southern Italy in 1787. Section 2 then raises the question concerning the nature of the relationship between Goethe and Humboldt. After a brief introduction to Humboldt, the paper turns to the introduction of Humboldt to Goethe by their mutual friend, Friedrich Schiller in 1794. Pivotal to the analysis of the relationship between Goethe and Humboldt, is the creation of what they called the 'Jena Circle,' which, in its most compact form, consisted of Goethe, Schiller and the Humboldts: Wilhelm, his wife Karoline, and his brother Alexander. Section 2 also examines the education that Goethe and Humboldt shared under the guidance of Schiller which, I argue, was strongly Kantian. Section 3 considers Humboldt's development of his comparative study of languages and suggests it is through his relationship with Goethe combined with his knowledge of Kant, that Humboldt addresses the Kantian problem of how sensibility and understanding are united in experience. As we will see, his answer is that language is the imaginative core that allows for conceptualised thinking.

Following Goethe's insights related to *Urform*, Humboldt believes in much the same fashion that all languages are only possible due to their being an archetype that he calls the universal *form of language*.[1] Finally, Section 4 argues that Humboldt's answer to the Kantian problem is Goethean in tone, the *form of language* is both a productive (formally generative) and creative organ of thought (multiplicity of languages and language use). Just as Goethe believed all plants conform to an ideal, so too did Humboldt think all languages conform to the ideal *form of language*, and, in essence, these are the points of homologies in thought from Goethe to Humboldt.

1. GOETHE'S *URFORM* AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIS *URPFLANZE*

It was only after his lifelong research, travel and fame that in 1817, and in the shadowed anticipation of his later years, that Goethe assembled his work in the fields of biology, botany and zoology together in a volume called *Zur Morphologie* (*On Morphology*).[2] In the subtitle, Goethe defined morphology as "*Bildung und Umbildung organischer Naturen*" (*Formation and Transformation of Organisms*). This idea of the formation and transformation of organisms, as will be shown, is something that Humboldt was interested in exploring in relation to the nature of language, even though he never explicitly used the term 'morphology' in his own work. Where Goethe sought to lay bare those features that plants have in common, in order to reduce the infinite variety of plant growth to a system of unity,[3] Humboldt sought to explain the diversity of languages and their infinite uses by revealing their common features that conform to the logical structures of mind.[4]

It was during his extensive trip to Italy in 1787 that Goethe's ideas on ideal types or *Urform* began to take shape related to his studies in botany. The stimulus

[1] See Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 17 vols, eds. B. Gebhardt, A. Leitzmann, W. Richter (Berlin: Behr, 1903–1936), vol. 7, 43–52. This source will be referred to as 'GS' for the rest of the paper. Likewise, '*On Language*' will denote: Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, ed. Michael Losonsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 48–53. And the orginal German publication: *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und seinen Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (Wiesbaden: Fourier, 2003), will follow Fourier's lead by simply referring to this version as *Über Sprache*.

[2] First coined by Goethe, the term 'morphology' is used across many fields today including linguistics where it was first adopted by August Schleicher (1821–1868). Schleicher, whose influences appear to include Wilhelm von Humboldt and Goethe, is given a detailed analysis by James McElvenny in his paper "August Schleicher and Materialism in 19th-Century Linguistics," in *Historiographia Linguistica: International Journal for the History of the Language Sciences*, vol. 45, no. 1–2, 133–152.

[3] See Rudolf Magnus, *Goethe als Naturforscher* (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1906), 74–76; Rudolf Magnus *Goethe as a Scientist*, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: Henry Schuman, 1949), 58–59.

[4] See Liam Tiernać Ó Beagáin, *Including Kant: Chomsky's linguistics and genealogy of linguistic creativity* (Dublin: University College Dublin, 2023), 114–130; Jürgen Trabant, "Sprachphilosophie und Linguistik," in *Wilhelm von Humboldt, Handbuch*, edited by C.F. Berghahn (Heidelberg: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2022), 198–230.

for the gestation period of thinking about what exactly an archetype would entail, seems to have been his observation of various plant types, and the differences between them in the surroundings of Italy to his experiences of them beforehand. He had spent the previous ten years fine-tuning his expertise in the area of botany, so that when his trip to Italy takes place, he writes on April 17, 1787,

> Die vielen Pflanzen, die ich sonst nur in Kübeln und Töpfen, ja die größte Zeit des Jahres nur hinter Glasfenstern zu sehen gewohnt war, stehen hier froh und frisch unter freiem Himmel und, indem sie ihre Bestimmung vollkommen erfüllen, werden sie uns deutlicher. Im Angesicht so vielerlei neuen und erneuten Gebildes fiel mir die alte Grille wieder ein: ob ich nicht unter dieser Schar die Urpflanze entdecken könnte? [5]

> Many plants which I have been accustomed to see only in pots and boxes—indeed, most of the year only under glass—here they grow unconcernedly right out in the open, and by thus fulfilling their destiny, their nature becomes much clearer to us. Seeing so much new and burgeoning growth, I came back to my old notion and wondered whether I might not chance upon my archetypal plant. There must be such a plant after all. If all plants were not moulded on one pattern, how could I recognise that they *are* plants? (Cited in *Goethe as a Scientist*, 45)

While initially he thought that he might find the archetypal plant in nature, he instead came to the conclusion during his stay in Sicily that this view was unrealistic. At the same time, he felt the idea of *Urform* was still a sound conceptual basis for the study of all plants and now saw his *Urpflanze* as a conceptual archetype to which all plants would necessarily conform. Writing to Herder from Naples on June 8, 1787, Goethe believed that

> Die Urpflanze wird das wunderlichste Geschöpf von der Welt über welches mich die Natur selbst beneiden soll. Mit diesem Modell und dem Schlüssel dazu, kann man alsdann noch Pflanzen ins unendliche erfinden, die konsequent sein müssen, das heißt: die, wenn sie auch nicht existieren, doch existieren könnten und nicht etwa malerische oder dichterische Schatten und Scheine sind, sondern eine innerliche Wahrheit und Notwendigkeit haben. Dasselbe Gesetz. wird sich auf alles übrige lebendige anwenden lassen. (Goethe, SW, Bd. 3.2, 596)

> The Archetypal plant will be the strangest growth the world has ever seen, and Nature herself shall envy me for it. With such a model, and with the key to it in one's hands, one will be able to contrive an infinite variety of plants. They will be strictly logical plants – in other words, even though they may not actually exist, they could exist. They will be imbued with inner truth and necessity. And the same law will be applicable to all that lives. (Cited in *Goethe as a Scientist*, 46)

[5] Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke: Münchner Ausgabe in 33 Bänden* (Munich: BTB, 2006), vol. 5, 327 (hereafter: SW).

Extending these ideas further, Goethe made several notes during his Italian journey as to how these insights might be applied. For example, he believes that the basis for investigating plant life and their various metamorphoses could be understood through the formulation that "*Hypothese: Alles ist Blatt, und durch diese Einfachheit wird die größte Mannigfaltigkeit möglich*" (Hypothesis: All is leaf. From this simplicity comes the greatest diversity) (my translation).[6] And as Magnus notes, "All Goethe's subsequent research in plant metamorphosis, in Italy as in Germany, merely elaborated from this single thought" (*Goethe as a Scientist*, 45), wherein Goethe says that in attempting to explain the metamorphosis of plants his method consisted in "*die mannigfaltigen, besondern Erscheinungen des herrlichen Weltgartens auf ein allgemeines, einfaches Prinzip zurückzuführen*" (reducing everything to a simple principle that could be applied generally to all of the diverse phenomena found in the glorious garden of the world) (Goethe, SM, Bd. 12, 70, my translation).

His research in this area was published in 1790, four years before he would meet Humboldt in Jena and whose first significant essays did not come to the fore until 1795. The 1790 publication of Goethe's *Attempt to Explain the Metamorphosis of Plants* has much in it that must have inspired Humboldt. For example, it has been noted that Humboldt originally wanted to undertake a trip to Italy lasting several years (following Goethe's example).[7] But Italy would have to wait until 1803 and instead he had no choice but to go to Paris, which, as we will see, was beneficial in the end for his study on the diversity of languages and their conforming to the ideal *form of language*.

In his 1790 monograph, Goethe lays out several critical points as to the symbiotic nature of the internal forces of plants and the effects their environments have on their development. As we will see, Humboldt appears to apply a similar methodology to his own studies in linguistics. Where Goethe places the leaf at the centre of his investigations, Humboldt places the verb as the key to understanding the central role of language as a faculty in conceptualisation, as well as explaining the diversity of languages due to environmental or sociohistorical factors.

Unlike the leading botanist Linnaeus and his school who attempted to classify all plants by certain individual outward characteristics, and who sought to bring the totality of plant life under the scope of the human mind by establishing as many different species and varieties as possible by making the most minute distinctions, Goethe instead believed that the growth cycles of all plants in their diversity could be explained by following a simple rule. Rather than making the most minute distinctions from the outset, Goethe arranged all phenomena he sought to study in continuous series. There were two series, the first was an attempt to compare different species of plants, while the second attempted to show the

[6] Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Schriften zur Naturwissenschaft, Complete Edition*, ed. Dorothea Kuhn and Wolf von Engelhardt (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1947), vol. 2, 9A, section 8 (hereafter: LA).

[7] See Carl F. Berghahn, "Das Leben Wilhelm von Humboldts," in *Wilhelm von Humboldt, Handbuch*, ed. C.F. Berghahn (Heidelberg: J.B. Metzler, 2022), 10. Hermann Klencke and Gustav Schlesier, *Lives of the Brothers Humboldt, Alexander and Wilhelm*, trans. Juliette Bauer (London: Ingram, Cooke, & Co, 1852), 24 ff, 303 ff.

sequence of individual organs within the same plant from buds to fully developed leaves. In the first series, what Goethe constructed was in essence a comparative analysis of plant life that allowed him to relate plants to one another and according to Magnus this "gave him a grasp of the different plant forms occurring in nature, from the simplest herb to the most intricate giant of the forest" (*Goethe as a Scientist*, 59).

In the second series he suggested that there is a threefold process of unfolding and involution. To begin, there are small buds, then there is a process of expansion followed by fully grown leaves. However, this is followed by further contractions and expansions until the process ends. The fundamental question Goethe asks is: What can be the causes for these phases of contraction and expansion that seem to necessarily follow one another? His explanatory hypothesis replies that it is both a feature of the plant and the environment in which it develops. Magnus observes that in a conducive environment, the plant continues its developmental phases since its "juices penetrate into the higher organs, becoming more and more finely filtered and modified in their course. This modified sap in turn modifies leaf growth, giving rise to petals, stamens, etc." (*Goethe as a Scientist*, 53).

By establishing these two methods of serial analysis, Goethe was able to construct comparative analyses of plants where he thought such comparisons were justified. Guiding him in these comparisons between plant life was what we may call the principle of constancy. That is to say, when he reaches the point where he feels he can make a generalisation this is the result of meticulous comparative analyses.

In short, this all too brief examination of Goethe's insights into plant growth shows how he believed that in the study of the developmental stages of growth one could turn to an idealised archetypal form to explain how particular plants in their diversity grow from seeds, germination, early-stage growth and finally into their full forms. Although all plants have particular processes that one can prescribe to them, they nonetheless adhere to the simple rules that Goethe sees as fundamental in their processes of maturation. In essence, Goethe's concept of *Urform* was intended as a new dimension beyond the 'static' concept of form in Linnaeus. The *Urform*, by comparison, is generative and determines the class of physically possible organisms. As we will see, Humboldt puts forward something very similar in his thesis on the diversity of languages and their conformity to his *form of language*.

2. WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT AND THE JENA CIRCLE

Born in Potsdam, Prussia, Wilhelm von Humboldt was a philosopher, linguist, and statesman. He was the first of two boys, the second of whom was the famous polymath Alexander von Humboldt, who would become the founding father of modern Geography. Humboldt never had his childhood studies attended to publicly and received his education from several tutors from an early age. He was immersed in the works of intellectuals from across Europe, including German thinkers such

as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, British philosophers like John Locke, as well as works by French theorists like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac.[8]

It was not until 1788 that Humboldt enrolled in public education, when he and Alexander attended one of the finest centres of learning in the German-speaking territories at the time, the University of Göttingen. It was during this period that the older Humboldt immersed himself in the works of Immanuel Kant and according to Trabant from this point onwards he became "*ein überzeugter Kantianer*" (a convinced Kantian) (*Sprachphilosophie und Linguistik*, 206). Indeed, his brother commented that Wilhelm might "study himself to death" over the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[9]

Completing university in 1790 with a primary degree in jurisprudence, Humboldt briefly moved to Berlin, where, following in his father's footsteps, he worked as a civil servant. But he soon grew tired of such chores and left the city in 1791 with his wife Karoline, whom he had just married. In June of that year, they moved to her family's estate near Jena and Humboldt spent the following years, which he would recall many years later as the "happiest and best period of [his] own life," [10] focusing on his philosophical work. Humboldt was first introduced to Goethe by Schiller shortly after Christmas in the New Year of 1794 in Erfurt (Losonsky, *Introduction*, viii). Along with his brother, Alexander, and other intellectuals like Friedrich Schlegel and his brother August Wilhelm, this group would form lifelong and sometimes tumultuous friendships driven by lengthy and spirited debates on multifarious topics that would influence each of them in their thinking.[11]

Fuelled by a desire to be closer to the action, Humboldt moved to Jena in 1794. Its university hosted other philosophers such as the Kantian thinker Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. But it was the inner circle of Goethe, Schiller, and his brother Alexander, that came to form the strongest influence on Humboldt's thinking. Although this circle of friends had different interests, one common influence that seemed to unite them was the work of Kant, whom all admired. Jena had come to be known as the "intellectual capital of the world," where "the greatest philosophers of the age"

[8] See Carl F. Berghahn *Das Leben Wilhelm von Humboldts*; Rudolf Haym, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Lebensbild und Charakteristik* (Berlin: Gartner, 1856); Kurt Mueller-Vollmer and Markus Messling, "Wilhelm von Humboldt," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. URL=<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/wilhelm-humboldt/>.

[9] See Alexander von Humboldt, (1973). *Die Jugendbriefe Alexander von Humboldts 1787–1799*, eds. Ilse Jahn and Fritz G. Lange (Berlin: Akademie, 1973), 44; Andrea Wollf, *The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the lost hero of science. and the Invention of Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

[10] Ludwig Geiger, *Goethes Briefwechsel mit Wilhelm und Alexander von Humboldt* (Berlin: Bondy, 1909), 10 (hereafter: GBH).

[11] See Haym, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Lebensbild und Charakteristik*, 88–172; Ernst Osterkamp, "Der Briefwechsel mit Goethe," in *Wilhelm von Humboldt, Handbuch*, ed. C.F. Berghahn (Heidelberg: J.B. Metzler, 2022), 280–283; Mueller-Vollmer & Messling, *Wilhelm Von Humboldt*: Trabant, *Sprachphilosophie und Linguistik*, 198–230; Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 2015; *Magnificent Rebels*, 2022.

were "inspired by Kant's discoveries [and] sought to outdo him."[12] But while the larger mood of the times in and around Jena was inspired by Kant, this attitude was heightened for Wilhelm within his immediate social sphere, where, according to Jürgen Trabant, he

> findet im Dreieck zwischen Kant, Schiller-Goethe und seinem Bruder Alexander, zwischen Philosophie, Dichtung und Naturforschung, gerade in diesen "Wiemar-Jenaer" Jahren seinen spezifischen Ort: die empirische Welt das Menschen und damit das man damals "Anthropologie" nannte. (*Sprachphilosophie und Linguistik*, 201)
>
> found his own place in the triangle between Kant, Schiller-Goethe and his brother Alexander and therefore between philosophy, poetry and natural science, especially in these 'Weimar-Jena' years: the empirical world of humanity or what was then called 'anthropology.' (my translation)

In these relationships, the most lasting bonds were between Wilhelm and Goethe. Among the voluminous collected correspondences of Humboldt and Goethe, one of the largest exchanges of letters is between them. And somewhat fittingly, the last letter Goethe wrote was to his dear friend, while Wilhelm's final words to Goethe were read at his funeral.[13] But, like Goethe, Wilhelm was initially attracted to Jena by Schiller and his journal project *Die Horen*.[14] Osterkamp believes that it was through this relationship that Goethe and Humboldt would form a strong friendship in a short space of time:

> Vom Sommer 1794 bis zum Sommer 1795 wurde die Grundlage für eine lebenslange Freundschaft gelegt, die trotz aller Trennungen, trotz jahrelangen Verstummens beider Briefpartner auch, über fast vier Jahrzehnte hinweg bis zum Jahre 1832 ungefährdet blieb. (*Der Briefwechsel mit Goethe*, 280)
>
> From the summer of 1794 to the summer of 1795 the foundations of a lifelong friendship were laid, which, in spite of all the time apart, and the years of silence between them would remain certain for nearly four decades until 1832. (my translation)

Yet, Wilhelm and Goethe were initially drawn to Jena because of Schiller's journal project and because of his deep knowledge and affection for the philosophy of Kant. Indeed, Goethe would later note both his and Wilhelm's debt to Schiller's influence on their "overall education" (GBH, 257 f.). Therefore, through Schiller,

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[12] Jeremy Adler, *Johann Wolfgang Goethe* (London: Reaktion, 2020), 160. See also Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987) 145, 204, 236; Susan Bernofsky "Infinite Imagination: Early Romanticism in Germany," in *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. M. Ferber. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 86–100.

[13] See Adler, *Johann Wolfgang Goethe*, 218–219; Ernst Osterkamp, *Der Briefwechsel mit Goethe*, 280–283.

[14] 'Horen' is taken from the Greek 'Horae' which denotes the goddesses of the seasons and captures the admiration this period of German thought had for the spirit of the Hellenistic age – something that is notable in Humboldt's discussion on the character of the Greek language.

Kant's influence found its way into the collaborative discourse between the Humboldts and Goethe – although both parties had been reading Kant long before.[15]

One of their projects during the period of the Jena Circle consisted in forming comparative concepts on the nature of anatomy. Klencke and Schlesier note that when Humboldt was away from Jena, Schiller wrote on 2nd October 1795 "Goethe laments your long absence very much. Even on account of anatomy he wished for your presence" (see *The Lives of the Brothers Humboldt*, 297). These studies would prove to be of value in Wilhelm's later life when his research focused wholly on language and its organic nature. But even sooner, and after the end of his time in Jena, Humboldt wrote to Goethe as early as 1798 that following their work together in comparative anatomy he was now working on a "comparative anthropology" (GBH, 49); and further in 1800 that he was working on the topic of linguistic diversity inspired by his trips to the Basque country (GBH, 107 ff., 140).

Many years later, Goethe would note the influence that he, Schiller and the Humboldt brothers had on one another, saying to Eckermann that

> "it makes a difference at what point in our lives we are exposed to the influence of a significant figure […] Kant […] was very important for me. Likewise, the fact that Schiller was so much younger than me […] and that the Humboldt and Schlegel brothers were starting to become known on my watch – all this was of the utmost importance. And the advantages I derived from this are incalculable."[16]

Humboldt too would acknowledge the influence of these friendships that were struck-up during his time in Jena when years later in a letter to Goethe he mentioned their "first shared education", wistfully longing, no doubt, to be in the company once more of his long-departed friend Friedrich Schiller, the days of their youth, and the headiness of ideas that flourished between them (GBH, 275–280).[17]

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[15] In 1790, the year Kant's third *Critique* was published, Koerner writes in a letter to Schiller that "Goethe was here a week, and I spent a good deal of time with him. I soon succeeded in getting closer to him and he was more communicative than I expected. Where we found most points of contact you will hardly guess. Where else but—in Kant? In the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* [(2000)] he has found food for his philosophy" (quoted in Cassirer, 1970, 64; cf. Goethe, GS, vol. 12, 96). Humboldt's studies in Göttingen did not deal with new philosophies. Therefore, he had only learned of Immanuel Kant from what he could pursue in his own time, and this was often under the tutelage of the Kantian scholar Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi; see Tilman Borsche, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1990), 23; Michael Losonsky, "Introduction," in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xxiv–xxv; Mueller-Vollmer and Messling, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*). In Jena, and under the influence of his circle of friends, Kant's philosophy and concern for how sensibility and understanding are united in experience start to become the framework upon which he develops his own theories (Borsche, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, 18; Mueller-Vollmer & Messling, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, 26–29; Trabant, "von Humboldt, Wilhelm," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences: Second Edition* (2015, 287), *Apeliotes oder Der Sinn der Sprache* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1986), 18–24, "How relativistic are Humboldt's 'Weltansichten'?," in *Explorations in Linguistic Relativity* eds. M. Pütz and M. H. Verspoor (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000), 26–28.

[16] Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. Allan Bluden. (London: Penguin, 2022), 130.

[17] See also *The Lives of the Brothers Humboldt*, 255 ff.

3. WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT'S *FORM OF LANGUAGE*

Like all things, the Jena circle (what Goethe had called '*unsere kleine Akademie*' (our little academy)[18] came to an end, and by 1797, Humboldt, along with his family, had moved to Paris, until government duties would call him to Rome in 1803. Despite the break-up of the little academy, Goethe and the Humboldts would remain lifelong friends and on one occasion where he met Wilhelm again, Goethe happily wrote to Wilhelm's wife Karoline that '*wir haben uns ziemlich wiedergefunden wie wir uns verlassen haben und auch gleich wieder unsre Unterhaltung angeknüpft, als wenn sie erst gestern wäre abgebrochen worden*' (We found each other once again and it was as if we had left each other only yesterday, right away we struck up our conversation like it had never ended) (GBH, 208, my translation; see *Der Briefwechsel mit Goethe*, 281).

During the letters back and forth between Goethe and Wilhelm, his first stop on his travels was in Paris which would prove important for the development of his language studies. In the company of French philosophers, Humboldt debated Kantian philosophy (GS, vol. 14, 483–487),[19] and during this time, he became increasingly interested in what the character of a people precisely is. His reply was that language as a capacity which is lived and used and presented in speech and texts is the keystone in answering this question. In Paris, echoing his friend's comparative work in biology, he would write to Goethe in April 1798 that he was fully concentrated on "studying the French national character and comparing it with the German one." The result was an ambitious plan for the "description of our century and the founding of a truly new science: a comparative anthropology" (GBH, 49). With this goal in mind, during his travels in Spain, Humboldt became eager to define the national character of the Basques (GBH, 107 ff.) and the Spaniards (GBH, 127 ff.). Upon his return to Paris, he wrote to Goethe once more on December 6, 1800, believing his anthropological observations would result in a "treatise on national character and linguistic differences and their influence" (GBH, 140; see *Der Briefwechsel mit Goethe*, 281).

But these ideas had been circling within Humboldt long before Paris. After a yearlong intense relationship with Goethe, he wrote to Schiller on 1st December 1795 that "*eine Idee*" (an idea) had come to him "*Gelegenheit eines sehr mittelmäßigen Buches [...] über den Geist des 18. Jahrhunderts*" (after the reading of a very mediocre book … on the spirit of the Eighteenth century). The idea was to assess

[18] Johann Wolfgang Goethe. *Goethe Begegnungen und Gespräche*, eds. Ernst Grumach and Renate Grumach (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 219. See also *Invention of Nature* esp. chapter 2.

[19] See Hans Aarsleff and John L. Logan, "An Essay on the Context and Formation of Wilhelm von Humboldt's Linguistic Thought," in *History of European Ideas*, 42. 6, 1977, 729–807; Losonsky's, *Introduction*; Mueller-Vollemer and Messling's, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*; Ó Beagáin's, *Including Kant*.

the different ways the human spirit had developed and from what basis it had developed. He argued:

> Es scheint mir nämlich jetzt mehr als je der wahre Zeitpunkt, Rechnung über die Fortschritte zu halten, welche der menschliche Geist und Charakter teils gemacht hat, teils noch erst machen muß.
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> It seems to me now more than ever the right time to take account of the progress that the human spirit and character has partly made and partly still has to make (BSH II, 22).[20]

For Humboldt, the answer to this question lies in the study of languages and how they conform to the ideal *form of language*. In 1811, he published his first major work on language entitled *Essai sur les langues du Nouveau Continent* (*Essay on the Languages of the New Continent*), which consisted of his grammars for native American languages (GS, vol. 3, 300–341), his commitment to linguistic universals and rejection of linguistic relativism which he is often wrongly appointed as being the founder of: one cannot be a committed Kantian and a relativist at the same time (see *Sprachphilosophie und Linguistik*).[21] Humboldt's solution to the question of the diversity of languages is to answer that they all flow from the same universal categories of the mind, that languages conform to the mind rather than the mind to languages (see *Sprachphilosophie und Linguistik*, 206).

The character of any given language is truly its creative aspect and this is what drives societies forward in works of art, science and philosophy. Among the heights of expression in the development of the German language's character during his lifetime and in his estimation were the works of Schiller and Goethe. Years later, speaking of character in his first speech to the Berlin Academy, and following Goethe's desire for a more humanistic science, Humboldt argued that the great works of any society are what drive it forward: '*Hierin also liegt der Schlussstein der Sprachkunde, ihr Vereinigungspunkt mit Wissenschaft und Kunst*' (Herein lies the keystone of linguistics, its point of union with science and art) (GS, vol. 4, 13). This position is consistent with his earlier view in *Latium und Hellas* (1806):

> Einer [...] ist der Odem, die Seele der Nation selbst, erscheint überall in gleichem Schritte mit ihr [...] die Sprache. (GS, vol. 3, 166)
>
> One thing […] is the breath, the soul of the nation itself, and appears everywhere in step with it […] the Language. (my translation)

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[20] Seidel Siegfried, *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Friedrich Schiller und Wilhelm von Humboldt* (2 Bde.) (Berlin: Aufbau, 1962). Also see Carl F. Berghahn, "Anthropologie und Geschichte," in *Wilhelm von Humboldt, Handbuch*, ed. C.F. Berghahn (Heidelberg, J.B. Metzler, 2022), 108 (hereafter BSH).

[21] For a contrasting view consider Roger Langham Brown, *Wilhelm von Humboldt's Conception of Linguistic Relativity*. (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967), hereafter *WvH CLR*.

Importantly, like Goethe's explanation of the developmental cycles of plant life, it is not only character which is important to Humboldt.[22] All truly creative aspects of languages and in all their diverse forms nonetheless necessarily rely on rudimentary rules or principles of language. In the *Kawi Introduction* at the beginning of his chapter *Character of languages* he makes a biologically driven analogy by pointing out that what he has discussed so far in relation to the underlying form is "*die nothwendige, sichernde Grundlage, in welcher das Feinere und Edlere Wurzel fassen kann*" (the necessary assured foundation, in which the finer and nobler elements can take root) (GS, vol. 7, 165; 1999, 148). The underlying form allows individuals to form communities through which a national form is developed. It must be remembered that, for Humboldt, language is in the first instance an activity of the individual. People involuntarily start speaking in a way that first and foremost cultivates their own minds. But among the individuals, groups form, from which languages emerge due to the "simultaneous self-activity of all." Quite how this happens is a mystery that leaves one in "referential awe" (1999, 38–42). But this is not just his mature position, in an essay written at the height of the Jena Cirlce period in 1795 called *Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie* (*Plan for a Comparative Anthropology*), in a Gothean style he writes:

> Die Achtsamkeit auf das Characteristische leistet aber noch mehr [als nur die Erkenntnis der Individualität des Menschen an seinem Ort und zu seiner Zeit]. Einestheils nimmt sie jeden Gegenstand zuerst und vorzüglich in seiner Beziehung auf das innere Wesen; anderntheils weckt sie den Charakter und erregt seine Thätigkeit.[23]
>
> But attention to the characteristic achieves even more [than just the recognition of the individuality of persons in their place and time]. On one hand, it takes every object first and foremost in its relation to inner being; on the other, it awakens the character and stimulates its activity. (my translation)

So, it seems Humboldt believes the emergence of language communities is likely due to the commonality of innate language capacities that exist among

[22] Related to developmental cycles, Friedrich Schiller holds to something similar in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reyhe von Briefen* (*On The Aesthetic Education of Man*) (1795; 1992, vol. 8, 556–676; 2016), explaining that "there are three different moments, or stages, of development to be distinguished through which both the individual man as well as the entire species must necessarily pass in a particular order if they are to fulfil the entire arc of their destiny" (2016, 89). This concern for the developmental cycles of humanity also appears to match his ideas concerning the archetypal human versus the individual who finds themselves at all times among the flux and tumult of social life when he says "there are two distinct ways in which we might imagine how temporal man coincides with the idea of man, and just as many ways in which the state can manifest itself in individuals: either through the pure man suppressing empirical man (the state suppressing individuality), or by the individual becoming the state (temporal man refining himself into the idea of man)" (xxiv). These contrasts between the archetypal human and the living individual, were part of his critique of Fichte's 1794 essay *Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (*On the Vocation of the Scholar*) (see Fichte, GS, 1796–1879, vol. 1, III, A3–A4).

[23] GS, vol. 1, 386, additions C.F. Berghahn, *Anthropologie und Geschichte*, 107.

individuals. For example, he is sure there are universal categories of language and assumes syntactic categories like verbs and personal pronouns are universal. So, before his comparative study of language use (*vergleichendes Sprachstudium*), there is a "*philosophische Grammatik*" (philosophical grammar) of the underlying form that allows for use.

4. HOMOLOGIES IN THOUGHT FROM GOETHE TO HUMBOLDT

It was during his meetings with Goethe in the Jena Circle that Humboldt first began to produce noteworthy essays on the topics of anthropology and language, and which seemed to follow the method laid down by Goethe in his study of the developmental cycles of plant life. For example, prior to his linguistic-turn in 1796, Humboldt wrote in a Goethean style about the Kantian concept of *Einbildungskraft* (*Imagination*) in two essays: *Über den Geschlechts Unterschied* (*On Sexual Difference*) and *Über männliche und weibliche Form* (*On the Male and Female form*) (GS, vol 1, 311–334, 335–369). In these essays, Humboldt discusses how Kant's philosophy might be explained by way of reproduction. Sensibility and understanding are united in experience, since in the first instance the sexes create new life and therefore new thinking (GS, vol. 1, 314), which he describes as the most 'sublime creature' of the imagination and extends this idea into a discussion on the arts and culture.[24] And in his first significant essay on language called *Über Denken und Sprechen*, Humboldt establishes his position that language is not merely an instrument with which to communicate thoughts but is *the* cognitive capacity that enables us to think and to do so self reflectively and with others. Central to this capacity is the imagination to the point where one can say that for Humboldt language is

[24] In a letter to Schiller, Kant admitted he found it difficult to make sense of Humboldt's essay (see Kant, 1999, 497–498), while Trabant believes he was in fact "shocked by Humboldt's somewhat pre-Freudian interpretation of his philosophy" (2015, 287). Nonetheless, Trabant and Ward are quite right to say "that from the beginning Humboldt's entire project revolves around Kant's notion of the synthesis performed by imagination" (2004, 130). And that through his study of language, Humboldt finds the vehicle that enables the imagination to create endlessly, since "the concept is not created independently of the word: word and concept form an indissoluble synthetic unity." This can only happen through creative acts found in the sound-form, since "thought is created as sound" (Trabant, 2015, 288). Moreover, Trabant argues that Humboldt clarifies the Kantian idea of 'schema,' which Kant (1902, 1998) understood as being formed when sensibility and understanding interact in the formation of thought, by suggesting that "the schema is thought *as* vocal sound." The "voice does not come *after* the mental event, but voice and concept come together are thought in synthetic unity … it is self-reflexive, and this acoustic self-control of the vocal production is the necessary condition of the symbolic nature of the word" (2017, 23). Here, while I believe Trabant has accurately described Humboldt's project, we should be reminded that for Humboldt, perception, which we often associate with the interaction of speaker-hearers, may be performed in isolation and without sound (Humboldt, 1999, 56). Thus, one is able to create ideas, and leaps of imagination, without uttering a single word physically, since deficiencies in the sense organs do not stop people from creating ideas of their own through creativity found in the sound-form (Humboldt, 1999, 65–66). Accordingly, we may say that the sound-form of Humboldt's underlying form of language is an innate aspect of mind that adheres to the form's inner-laws that may be used in commune with others or with one's self.

imaginative thinking, constructing one idea upon another in a process similar to crystallisation.[25]

In fact, no conceptualised thinking is possible without language since according to Humboldt it is the formative organ of thought (*On Language*, 54; GS, vol. 7, 53) whereupon any language "rests upon the totality of its original design, upon its organic structure, its individual form" and that "language-making can only go on within the limits prescribed to it by the *original design of the language*" (*On Language*, 34). Language, therefore, is more than just a mere communicator of ideas, it is actively involved in the formation and production of them.

At times, this idea of languages conforming to the *form of language* is recognised in the literature as Goethe's influence on Humboldt. For example, Lydia Dippel [26] holds that Humboldt is in agreement with Goethe in relation to the biological basis of the activity of the individual and its relation to the whole.[27] In her essay "Kindred Spirits" (2011, 107), Susanne Ledanff believes that Humboldt's comparative anthropology where "each individual, as a person, and through his interaction with other human being's contributes to the totality of humanity" is drawn from Goethe's views. Furthermore, scholarship in linguistics has noted similar influences. For example, Humboldtian scholar Roger Langham Brown suggests that Goethe "had considerable influence on the development of Humboldt's thought; the term 'morphology' had been introduced by Goethe, and it was to his notion of organic types that Humboldt owed his own conception of linguistic types" (*WvH CLR*, 49). Furthermore, American linguist Daniel G. Brinton argued in the late nineteenth century that Humboldt "fully recognized … a progress, an organic growth in human speech." [28] Furthermore, "he came to look upon each language as an organism, all its parts bearing harmonious relations to each other … each language again bears the relation to language in general that the species does to the genus, or the genus to the order." According to Brinton, "All languages are connected in Humboldt's view in the same manner as the members of a biological family" ("The Philosophic Grammar", 308–311).

These homologies in thought from Goethe to Humboldt are perhaps most strongly portrayed in Humboldt's paper *On the Comparative Linguistics in Relation to the Different Periods of the Development of Language*, published in 1822. Here, he expresses most forcefully his view that language may be seen as an organism by rejecting any idea that languages can be studied atomistically because "Language could not be invented or come upon were its archetype not already present in the human mind" and that further "there are no single, separate facts of language. Each

[25] GS, vol. 7, 165; *On Language*, 148; see Trabant, *Sprachphilosophie und Linguistik*, 198.

[26] Lydia Dippel, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Ästhetik und Anthropologie*. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990), 42–43.

[27] See Susanne Ledanff, "Kindred Spirits: Collective Explorations of Individuality in the Classical Period (Goethe, Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt)," in *Collective Creativity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 112.

[28] Daniel G. Brinton, "The Philosophic Grammar of American Languages, as set forth by Wilhelm von Humboldt, with the translation of an unpublished memoir by him on the American Verb," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 22 120, Part IV, (1885): 306–331.

of its elements announces itself as a part of a whole."[29] That there are particular languages is as Langham Brown argues "accounted for in terms of the common human ability to develop and use language, and also of the particular history of national groupings of language users" (*WvH CLR*, 49). But it should be noted that as early as 1795, Humboldt wrote to Schiller in what can only be described as Goethean tones that

> [Language] has to possess at any moment of its existence the characteristics that make it a whole. Immediate exhalation of an organic being in its physical and spiritual form, it partakes of the nature of all organic phenomena, which is that Each thing in it can only exist through the Other, and Everything can only be through the Force that permeates the Whole.[30]

Much later in the *Kawi Introduction* (*Über Sprache*, GS, vol, 7, *On Language*), Humboldt holds that languages are not mechanical products, nor are they artefacts that we might describe as finished products of human history which are learnt by rote. Rather, languages are organic activities that are in constant development. Like other mental faculties, language is epigenetic and matures along biologically predetermined paths, so that

> Dass bei den Kindern nicht ein mechanisches Lernen der Sprache, sondern eine Entwicklung der Sprachkraft vorgeht, beweist auch, dass, da den hauptsächlichsten menschlichen Kräften ein gewisser Zeitpunkt im Lebensalter zu ihrer Entwicklung angewiesen ist, alle Kinder unter den verschiedenartigsten Umständen ungefähr in demselben, nur innerhalb eines kurzen Zeitraums schwankenden Alter sprechen und verstehen. (GS, vol 3, 58)

> In children there is not a mechanical learning of language, but a development of linguistic power, [which] is also proven by the fact that since the major abilities of humans are allotted a certain period of life for their development, all children, under the most diverse conditions, speak and understand at about the same age, varying only within a brief timespan. (*On Language*, 58)

This non-mechanical learning suggests to Humboldt that there is an underlying form that generates language involuntarily and uniformly across the species. The underlying form is an answer to how children might acquire languages with such speed and across extremely similar timelines regardless of their languages or environments.

Humboldt's idea that the language organ is the same for all in its "original tendency" (*On Language*, 54) and whose underlying rules remain largely fixed and unchanging through an individual's linguistic development (*On Language*, 53)

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[29] Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Humanist without Portfolio*, translated by Marianne Cowan (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1963), 239–240. Also see (GS, vol. 4, 1–34).

[30] Brigitte Nerlich, David D. Clarke, "Wilhelm von Humboldt," in *Culture and Language Use*, eds. Gunter Senft, Jef Vershueren, Jan-Ola Östman, trans. Brigitte Nerlich (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009), 179.

follows Goethe's insights related to the diverse developmental cycles of plant life that nonetheless he believes follows his ideal archetype. For example, Humboldt believes that:

> Denn so wundervoll ist in der Sprache die Individualisirung innerhalb der allgemeinen Uebereinstimmung, dass man ebenso richtig sagen kann, dass das ganze Menschengeschlecht nur Eine Sprache, als dass jeder Mensch eine besondere besitzt. (GS, vol. 7, 51)

> In language the *individualisation* within a *general conformity* is so wonderful, that we may say with equal correctness that the whole human species has but one language, and that every man has one of his own. (*On Language*, 53)

The human species has one language, an underlying form, which allows for particular languages in particular epochs among particular peoples to develop in particular ways, but which nonetheless adhere to the underlying form that guides any natural language along the paths of its development. So, again, we may say humans have one language, the underlying form, and that every individual has their own particular language that resonates within their own community.

5. CONCLUSION

In short, the similarities between Goethe's concept of *Urform*, and as the paper emphasised the *Urpflanze* in his botanical studies in particular, with Humboldt's later concept of the organic nature of his *form of language* are unmistakable. As noted in the article's comments on Goethe's thesis of plant biology, his concept of *Urform* can be seen as a generative and fundamental principle that creates the space for what possible shape physical organisms might take. The *Urpflanze* is constant and unchanging, meaning that within normal parameters only superficial differences exist due to varying environmental conditions. Similarly, Humboldt's *form of language* limits the ways in which any languages are used, since the universal principles of grammatical form decide what types of languages are possible. In this regard, Humboldt says language

> operates in a *constant and uniform* way. For the mental power which exerts it is the same, ***differing only within certain modest limits***. Its purpose is understanding […] [Therefore], the constant and uniform element in this mental labour of elevating articulated sound to an expression of thought, when viewed in its fullest possible comprehension and systematically presented, constitutes the *form* of language. (*On Language*, 50, my italics in bold)

On the face of it, it might be said that these parallels between Goethe and Humboldt are merely uncanny similarities, if nonetheless striking all the same. However, when taking the relationship between Goethe and Humboldt into account, it appears reasonable to suggest that the similarities in thought are not

mere analogies but are in fact homologies, i.e., ideas originating in Goethe are digested by Humboldt and find their uses in his analyses of languages. Before meeting in 1794, Goethe had long studied the nature of plant life and had come to the idea of the ideal botanical archetype *Urpflanze* by 1787 while in Italy. In contrast, before his time with the Jena Circle the much younger Humboldt had written nothing of significance. From 1795 onwards, however, Humboldt's thinking flourished, and he was writing on themes concerning human society that were inspired by Goethe's comparative approach to scientific enquiry, which he himself witnessed while working with Goethe and the younger Humboldt in Jena. In the end, Humboldt devoted his studies to the problems of linguistics and approached these enquiries by investigating as many languages as he possibly could—like so much of Goethe's work, his too was a comparative study. In applying the Goethean method, Humboldt emphasised the diverse nature of languages and suggested that they conformed to an archetypal ideal called the *form of language*. A project which, in part at least, seems to have been inspired by his close and lifelong friend Goethe.

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