

Humboldt: The work of the spirit.
from: Humboldt: On Language . 1995.

§7 46-64

We have now reached the point at which we recognize *languages* as the first necessary stage in the primitive cultivation of mankind, from whence nations are first able to pursue this higher human tendency. They grew up in similarly conditioned fashion, along with *mental power*, and form at the same time the animating inspiring principle of the latter. But neither proceeds in succession to or apart from the other, for each is utterly and inseparably the same act of the intellectual faculty. In that a people effects, from its inner freedom, the development of its language, as the instrument of every human activity within it, it seeks and simultaneously attains to the thing itself, that is, to something different and higher; and in that it gets on to the road of poetic creation and speculative thought, it simultaneously works back, in turn, upon language. If the first even raw and uncultivated attempts of intellectual endeavour are assigned the name of *literature*, language always takes the same road with it, and so both are inseparably tied to one another.

The *mental individuality* of a people and the *shape of its language* are so intimately fused with one another, that if one were given, the other would have to be completely derivable from it. For *intellectuality* and *language* allow and further only forms that are mutually congenial to one another. Language is, as it were, the outer appearance of the spirit of a people; the language is their spirit and the spirit their language; we can never think of them sufficiently as identical. How they actually conjoin with each other in one and the same source, beyond reach of our conception, remains inexplicably hidden from us. But without wishing to decide as to the priority of one or the other, we must see the real principle of explanation and true determining ground in the mental power of nations, since this alone stands independently living before us, whereas language only attaches to it. For so far as even the latter is revealed to us in creative independence, it is lost beyond the realm of appearance in an ideal essentiality. Historically, our concern is always with actually speaking men, merely, but we should not on that account lose sight of the true situation. Though *we* may separate intellectuality and language, no such division in fact exists. If language appears to us, rightly, as too high a thing to be ranked as a human artefact, like other evidences of the spirit, the situation would be different if man's mental power did not confront us merely in particular instances, but the very

essence of it streamed in its unfathomable profundity towards us, and we were able to see into the connection of man's individuality; for even language transcends the separateness of individuals. For practical purposes it is, however, specially important to rest content with no mere lower principle for explaining languages, but really to ascend to this last and highest one, and to see as the fixed point of the whole mental configuration the principle that the structure of languages differs among mankind, because and insofar as the mental individuality of nations is itself different.

If we enter, however, as we cannot refrain from doing, into the nature of this *diversity* in the particular form of language-structure, we can no longer seek to apply to the details of language an investigation of mental individuality, first undertaken separately for its own sake. In the early epochs to which the present considerations transport us, we know the nations, as such, only by their languages, nor do we ever know exactly which people, even, we are to think of, by descent and affinity, in connection with each language. Thus Zend, for us, is really the language of a nation that we can define more exactly only by way of conjecture. Among all manifestations whereby spirit and character can be recognized, language, however, is also the only one suited to exhibit both, even to their inmost windings and recesses. If we look upon *languages*, therefore, as a basis for explaining successive *mental development*, we must indeed regard them as having arisen through intellectual individuality, but must seek the nature of this individuality in every case in its *structure*; so that if the considerations here introduced are to be carried to completion, it is now incumbent on us to enter more closely into the nature of languages and the possibility of their retroactive differences, in order thereby to couple the comparative study of languages to its last and highest reference-point.

A certain line of linguistic research is called for, however, if the way above indicated is to be followed with success. We must look upon *language*, not as a dead *product*, but far more as a *producing*, must abstract more from what it does as a designator of objects and instrument of understanding, and revert more carefully, on the other hand, to its origin, closely entwined as it is with inner mental activity, and to its reciprocal influence on the latter. The advances that linguistic inquiry owes to the successful efforts of recent decades make it easier to survey this in its full extent. We can now approach nearer to the goal of setting forth the individual ways in which the business of producing language is brought to completion among the variously divided, isolated and conjoined populations of mankind. But in this lies the very cause of the diversity of human language-structure, and likewise the influence of this upon the mind's evolution, and thus the whole topic of our present concern.

306 But the moment we embark on this course of inquiry, an important difficulty stands in our way. Language presents us with an infinity of *details*, in words, rules, analogies and exceptions of every kind, and we are not a little perplexed at how to bring this mass, which, apart from the order already brought into it, still seems to us a bewildering chaos, into judicious comparison with the unity of the image of man's *mental power*. Even if we possess all the necessary lexical and grammatical detail of two major branches of language, e.g. Sanscrit and Semitic, we have still made but little progress thereby in the endeavour to catch the character of either in such simple outline as to permit a fruitful comparison of them, or a determination of their allotted place, by reference to the mental power of nations, in the general enterprise of language-creation. This still demands a special search for the communal *sources* of individual peculiarities, the drawing together of the scattered features into the image of an *organic whole*. Only so do we gain a purchase by which to hold on to the details. So in order to compare different languages fruitfully with one another, in regard to their characteristic structure, we must carefully investigate the form of each, and in this way ascertain how each resolves the main questions with which all language-creation is confronted. But since this term 'form' is used in various connections in investigations of language, I believe I must spell out more fully the sense in which I would wish it to be taken

here. This appears the more necessary in that here we are talking, not of language as such, but of the various different peoples, so that it is also a matter of defining what is meant by one *particular language*, in contrast, on the one hand, to the linguistic family, and on the other to a dialect, and what we are to understand by *one language*, where it undergoes essential changes during its career.

Language, regarded in its real nature, is ~~something~~, and at every moment a *transitory* one. Even its maintenance by writing is always just an incomplete, mummy-like preservation, only needed again in attempting thereby to picture the living utterance. In itself it is no product (*Ergon*), but an activity (*Energeia*). Its true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. For it is the ever-repeated *mental labour* of making the *articulated* sound capable of expressing *thought*. In a direct and strict sense, this is the definition of *speech* on any occasion; in its true and essential meaning, however, we can also regard, as it were, only the totality of this speaking as the language. For in the scattered chaos of words and rules that we are, indeed, accustomed to call a language, there is present only the *particular* brought forth by this speaking, and this never completely, and first calling for new work, so as to detect from it the nature of the living speech and to provide a true image of the living language. It is precisely the highest and most refined aspect that cannot be discerned from these disparate elements, and can only be perceived or divined in *connected discourse*; which is all the more proof that language proper lies in the act of its real production. It alone must in general always be thought of as the true and primary, in all investigations which are to penetrate into the living essentiality of language. The break-up into words and rules is only a dead makeshift of scientific analysis.

To describe languages as a *work of the spirit* is a perfectly correct and adequate terminology, if only because the existence of spirit as such can be thought of only in and as activity. The dismemberment of their structure that is indispensable for studying them does indeed oblige us to consider them as a *procedure* advancing by specific means to specific goals, and to that extent really to view them as *fashioned* by nations. The misconception that may thus arise has already been sufficiently acknowledged above,¹ and hence these terms cannot be harmful to the truth.

I have already pointed out earlier on (pp. 42-3) that in our study of language we find ourselves plunged throughout – if I may so put it – into a historical milieu, and that neither a nation nor a language, among those known to us, can be called *original*. Since each has

¹ Cf. pp. 24, 25, 44, 46-7 and §22 below.

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already received from earlier generations material from a prehistory unknown to us, the mental activity which, as earlier explained, produces the expression of thought, is always directed at once upon something already *given*; it is not a purely creative, but a reshaping activity.

Now this *labour* 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*. Thus nobody may speak differently to another from the way in which the latter, under similar circumstances, would have spoken to him. In the end the material transmitted is not only of this kind, but also closely allied throughout with the train of thought, having itself a similar origin. 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.

In this definition, form appears as an *abstraction* fashioned by science. But it would be quite wrong to see it also in itself as a mere non-existent thought-entity of this kind. In actuality, rather, it is the quite individual *urge* whereby a nation gives validity to thought and feeling in language. Only because we are never allowed to view this urge in the undivided totality of its striving, but merely in its particular effects on each occasion, are we also left with no recourse but to summarize the uniformity of its action in a dead general concept. In itself this urge is single and alive.

The difficulty of precisely the most important and refined inquiries into language resides very often in this, that something emanating from the total impression of the language is perceived, indeed, by the clearest and most convincing feeling, yet we fail in the attempt to set it out with sufficient fullness, and to define it in specific concepts. We now have to struggle with this here as well. The characteristic form of languages depends on every *single* one of their smallest *elements*; however inexplicable it may be in detail, each is in some way determined by that form. It is scarcely possible, however, to find points of which it can be maintained that this form has decisively attached to them, taken individually. So if we work through a given language, we shall find much that we could also well imagine to be otherwise without harming the nature of its form, and in order to perceive the latter in pure isolation are driven back to the *total impression*. Now here the opposite at once occurs. The most distinct *individuality* plainly strikes the eye and is borne inexorably in upon our feeling. Languages, in this respect, can least inaccurately be compared with *human countenances*. The individuality is undeniably

there, resemblances are recognized, but no measurement or description of the parts in detail and in their interconnection can subsume the particularity in a concept. It rests upon the whole, and in the equally individual apprehension; and hence, too, no doubt, each physiognomy seems different to everyone. Since language, in whatever shape we may receive it, is always the mental exhalation of a nationally individual life, both factors must also enter there as well. However much in it we may fix and embody, dismember and dissect, there always remains something unknown left over in it, and precisely this which escapes treatment is that wherein the unity and breath of a living thing resides. Given this nature of languages, depiction of the form of any one of them in the sense here stated can never thus succeed quite completely, but always up to a certain degree only, though one that is adequate to a survey of the whole. But by this concept the linguist is nonetheless apprised of the path on which he must track the secrets of language and seek to unveil its nature. In neglecting this route he unfailingly overlooks a multitude of research points, must leave unexplained a great deal that is actually explicable, and takes to be subsisting in isolation what is bound together by living ties.

From the foregoing remarks it is already self-evident that by the form of language we are by no means alluding merely to the so-called *grammatical form*. The distinction we are accustomed to draw between grammar and vocabulary can serve only for the practical purpose of learning a language; it can lay down neither limits nor rules for true linguistic research. The concept of the form of languages extends far beyond the rules of *word-order* and even beyond those of *word-formation*, insofar as we mean by these the application of certain general logical categories, of active and passive, substance, attribute, etc. to the roots and basic words. It is quite peculiarly applicable to the formation of the *basic words* themselves, and must in fact be applied to them as much as possible, if the nature of the language is to be truly recognizable.

The form is contrasted, indeed, to a *matter*; but to find the matter of linguistic form, we must go beyond the bounds of language. Within the latter, it is only relatively speaking that one thing can be regarded as the matter of another, e.g. the basic words in contrast to declension. But the matter here is again perceived in other connections as form. A language can also borrow words from an alien source and genuinely treat them as matter. But if so they are such again in relation to it, not in themselves. In an absolute sense there can be no *formless matter* within language, since everything in it is directed to a specific goal, the expression of thought, and this work already

begins with its first element, the articulated sound, which of course becomes articulate precisely through being formed. The real matter of language is, on the one hand, the sound as such, and on the other the totality of sense-impressions and spontaneous mental activities which precede the creation of the concept with the aid of language.

It is therefore self-evident that, in order to obtain an idea of the form of a language, we must first of all attend to the real nature of the *sounds*. Investigation of the form of a language begins right away with the alphabet, and this is treated as its primary basis throughout every part of it. The concept of form does not, as such, exclude anything factual and individual; everything to be actually established on historical grounds only, together with the most individual features, is in fact comprehended and included in this concept. It is only, indeed, if we follow the path here indicated, that all the *details* will be safely brought under investigation, since otherwise they readily run the risk of being overlooked. This leads, admittedly, to a laborious examining of fundamentals, which often extends to minutiae; but there are also details, plainly quite paltry in themselves, on which the total effect of languages is dependent, and nothing is so inconsistent with their study as to wish to seek out in them only what is great, inspired and pre-eminent. Exact investigation of every grammatical subtlety, every division of words into their elements, is necessary throughout, if we are not to be exposed to errors in all our judgements about them. It is thus self-evident that in the concept of linguistic form no detail may ever be accepted as an *isolated fact*, but only insofar as a method of language-making can be discovered therein. Through exhibiting the form we must perceive the specific course which the language, and with it the nation it belongs to, has hit upon for the *expression of thought*. We must be able to see how it relates to *other languages*, not only in the particular goals prescribed to it, but also in its reverse effect upon the mental activity of the nation. In its own nature it is itself an apprehension of particular *linguistic elements in mental unity* – such elements to be regarded as matter in contrast to this form. For a form of this kind resides in every language, and by means of this comprehensive unity a nation makes the language bequeathed by its forebears into its own. The same unity must therefore be found again in the depiction; and only if we ascend from the scattered elements to this unity do we truly obtain a conception of the language, since without such a procedure we are manifestly in danger of not even understanding the said elements in their true individuality, and still less in their real connection.

As may be noted here in advance, both the *identity* and the *affinity of languages* must rest on the identity and affinity of their *forms*, since

the effect can only be equal to the cause. So the form alone decides what other tongues a language is affiliated to by family ties. We shall apply this in the sequel to the Kawi language, which, however many Sanscrit words it may have incorporated, does not cease on that account to be a Malayan tongue. The forms of *several languages* may unite into a yet *more general form*, and the forms of *all* actually do this, in that we everywhere set out simply from the *most general*: from the connections and relationships of the ideas required to designate concepts and order speech, from the similarity of vocal organs, whose scope and nature permit only a certain number of articulated sounds, and finally from the relations obtaining between particular consonant and vowel sounds and certain sensory impressions, which then give rise to similarity of designation, without family relationship. For in language the *individualization* 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. But among the linguistic similarities connected by closer analogies, the most outstanding is that which arises from the *genetic relationship* of nations. This is not the place to inquire as to the degree and nature of such similarity that is needed to justify the assumption of genetic relationship, where historical facts do not immediately establish it. We are here concerned merely with applying the above-developed concept of linguistic form to genetically related languages. Now in these it follows naturally from the foregoing, that the form of the particular related languages must reappear in that of the whole family. Nothing can be contained in them which would not be in accord with the general form; in the latter, rather, we shall normally find the peculiarities of each to be in some way indicated. And in each family there will be one language or another which contains the original form with greater purity and completeness. For we are speaking here only of languages that have arisen from one another, where a genuinely given matter (this term being understood always in a relative sense, as above explained) is conveyed and transformed, therefore, from one people to another in determinate sequence, though the latter can but seldom be exactly demonstrated. But the transformation itself may nevertheless remain a closely related one, given a similar way of thinking and trend of ideas in the mental power that effects it, a likeness in the speech-organs and traditional habits of utterance, and finally, where many historically external influences coincide.

§9

Since the diversity of languages rests on their form, and the latter is most intimately connected with the mental aptitudes of nations and the power that suffuses them at the moment of creation or new conception, it now becomes necessary to develop this notion in greater detail.

In pondering on language in general, and analysing the individual tongues that are clearly distinct from one another, two principles come to light: the *sound-form* and the *use* made of it to designate objects and connect thoughts. The latter is based on the requirements that *thinking* imposes on language, from which the *general laws* of language arise; and this part, in its original tendency, is therefore the same in all human beings, as such, until we come to the individuality of their mental endowments or subsequent developments. The sound-form, on the other hand, is the truly constitutive and guiding principle of the diversity of languages, both in itself, and in the assisting or obstructing power it presents to the inner tendency of the language. As an element of the whole human organism, closely related to the inner mental power, it is, of course, equally precisely connected with the collective outlook of the nation; but the nature and basis of this tie are veiled in a darkness that scarcely permits of any clarification. Now from these two principles, together with the inwardness of their mutual interpenetration, there proceeds the *individual form* of each language, and they constitute the points that linguistic analysis must examine and try to present in connection. The most indispensable thing here is for the undertaking to be based on a correct and proper view of language, the depth of its origin and the breadth of its scope; and hence we must first of all take time to examine these latter.

I take the *practice of language* here in its widest extent, not merely in its relation to speech and the stock of its verbal elements, which are its direct product, but also in its connection with the capacity for thought and feeling. We are to consider the whole route whereby, proceeding from the mind, it reacts back upon the mind.

Language is the formative organ of *thought*. *Intellectual activity*, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes, through *sound*, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. But the former is also intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a *union* with the verbal sound; thought

cannot otherwise achieve clarity, nor the representation become a concept. The inseparable bonding of *thought*, *vocal apparatus* and *hearing* to language is unalterably rooted in the original constitution of human nature, which cannot be further explained. The concordance of sound and thought is nevertheless plain to see. Just as thought, like a lightning-flash or concussion, collects the whole power of representation into a single point, and shuts out everything else, so sound rings out with abrupt sharpness and unity. Just as thought seizes the whole mind, so sound has predominantly a penetrating power that sets every nerve atingle. This power that distinguishes it from all other sense-impressions is evidently due to the fact (which is not always so with the other senses, or is so differently), that the ear receives the impression of a movement, and in the echoing sound of the voice the impression, even, of a veritable action; and this action proceeds here from within a living creature, a thinking creature if the sound is articulated, and a feeling one if it is not. Just as thought at its most human is a yearning from darkness into light, from confinement into the infinite, so sound streams outward from the heart's depths, and finds a medium wonderfully suited to it in the air, the most refined and easily moveable of all elements, whose seeming incorporeality is also a sensuous counterpart to the mind. The cutting sharpness of the vocal sound is indispensable to the understanding in apprehending objects. Both things in external nature, and the activity excited within, press in upon man all at once with a host of characteristics. But he strives to compare, separate and combine, and in his higher purposes to fashion an ever more embracing unity. So he also insists upon apprehending objects in a determinate unity, and demands the unity of sound to depute in place of it. But sound suppresses none of the other impressions which objects are capable of producing upon outer or inner sense; instead, it becomes the bearer of them, and in its individual composition, connected with that of the object – and this precisely according to the way that the speaker's individual sensibility grasps the latter – it appends a new designating impression. At the same time the incisiveness of sound permits an incalculable number of modifications which are yet precisely distinctive when presented, and do not mingle in combination, a thing not found to the same degree in any other sensory effect. Since intellectual effort does not just occupy the understanding, but arouses the whole man, this too is chiefly promoted by the sound of the voice. For as living sound it comes forth from the breast like breathing life itself, is the accompaniment, even without language, to pain and joy, aversion and desire, and thus breathes the life it flows from into the mind that receives it, just as language itself always reproduces, along with the

object presented, the feeling evoked by it, and within itself couples, in ever-repeated acts, the world and man, or, to put it otherwise, the spontaneously active and the receptive sides of his nature. And suited, finally, to vocalization is the upright posture of man, denied to animals; man is thereby summoned, as it were, to his feet. For speech does not aim at hollow extinction in the ground, but demands to pour freely from the lips towards the person addressed, to be accompanied by facial expression and demeanour and by gestures of the hand, and thereby to surround itself at once with everything that proclaims man human.

After this preliminary view of the aptitude of sound to the operations of the mind, we can now go more accurately into the connection of *thought* and language. Subjective activity fashions an *object* in thought. For no class of ideas can be regarded as a purely receptive contemplation of a thing already present. The activity of the senses must combine synthetically with the inner action of the mind, and from this combination the idea is ejected, becomes an object *vis-à-vis* the subjective power, and, perceived anew as such, returns back into the latter. But *language* is indispensable for this. For in that the mental striving breaks out through the lips in language, the product of that striving returns back to the speaker's ear. Thus the idea becomes transformed into real objectivity, without being deprived of subjectivity on that account. Only language can do this; and without this transformation, occurring constantly with the help of language even in silence, into an objectivity that returns to the subject, the act of concept-formation, and with it all true thinking, is impossible. So quite regardless of communication between man and man, speech is a necessary condition for the thinking of the individual in solitary seclusion. In appearance, however, language develops only *socially*, and man understands himself only once he has tested the intelligibility of his words by trial upon others. For objectivity is heightened if the self-coined word is echoed from a stranger's mouth. But nothing is robbed from subjectivity, for man always feels himself one with his fellow-man; indeed it is strengthened, since the representation transformed into language is no longer the exclusive possession of a single subject. In passing over to others, it joins the common stock of the entire human race, of which each individual possesses a modification containing the requirements for completion by others. The greater and more active the social collaboration on a language, the more it gains, under otherwise similar circumstances. What language makes necessary in the simple act of thought-creation is also incessantly repeated in the mental life of man; social communication through language provides

him with conviction and stimulus. The power of thinking needs something that is like it and yet different from it. By the like it is kindled, and by the different it obtains a touchstone of the essentiality of its inner creations. Although the cognitive basis of truth, of the unconditionally fixed, can lie for man only within himself, the struggle of his mental effort towards it is always surrounded by the risk of deception. With a clear and immediate sense only of his mutable limitedness, he is bound to regard truth as something lying outside him; and one of the most powerful means of approaching it, of measuring his distance away from it, is social communication with others. All speaking, from the simplest kind onwards, is an attachment of what is individually felt to the common nature of mankind.

Nor is it otherwise with *understanding*. There can be nothing present in the soul, save by one's own activity, and understanding and speaking are but different effects of this power of speech. Conversing together is never comparable with a transfer of material. In the understander, as in the speaker, the same thing must be evolved from the inner power of each; and what the former receives is merely the harmoniously attuning stimulus. Hence it is also very natural for man to re-utter at once what he has just understood. In this way language resides in every human being in its whole range, which means, however, nothing else but that everyone possesses an urge governed by a specifically modified, limiting and confining power, to bring forth gradually the whole of language from within himself, or when brought forth to understand it, as outer or inner occasion may determine.

But understanding could not, as we have just found, be based upon inner spontaneity, and communal speech would have to be something other than mere mutual arousal of the hearer's speech-capacity, did not the diversity of individuals harbour the unity of human nature, fragmented only into separate individualities. The comprehension of *words* is a thing entirely different from the understanding of *unarticulated sounds*, and involves much more than the mere mutual evocation of the sound and the object indicated. The *word*, to be sure, can also be taken as an indivisible whole, just as even in writing we recognize the meaning of a word-group, without yet being certain of its alphabetic composition; and it may be possible that the child's mind proceeds thus in the first beginnings of understanding. But just as not merely the animal's sensory capacity, but the human power of speech is excited (and it is far more probable that even in the child there is no moment when this would not be the case, however feebly), so the *word*, too, is perceived as articulated. But now what *articulation* adds to the mere evocation of its meaning (which naturally also

occurs more perfectly thereby), is that it presents the word directly through its form as part of an infinite whole, a language. For even in single words, it is by means of this that we are given the possibility of constructing, from the elements of the language, a really indeterminate number of other words according to specific feelings and rules, and thereby to establish among all words an affinity corresponding to the affinity of concepts. The soul, however, would get no intimation at all of this artificial mechanism, would no more apprehend articulation than the blind do colours, if it did not harbour a power of rendering this possibility actual. For language cannot indeed be regarded as a material that sits there, surveyable in its totality, or communicable little by little, but must be seen as something that eternally produces itself, where the laws of production are determined, but the scope and even to some extent the nature of the product remain totally unspecified. The *speech-learning* of children is not an assignment of words, to be deposited in memory and rebabbled by rote through the lips, but a growth in linguistic capacity with age and practice. What is heard does more than merely convey information to oneself; it readies the mind also to understand more easily what has not yet been heard; it makes clear what was long ago heard, but then half understood, or not at all, in that a similarity to the new perception suddenly brings light to the power that has since become sharpened; and it enhances the urge and capacity to absorb from what is heard ever more, and more swiftly, into the memory, and to let ever less of it rattle by as mere noise. The advances thus accelerate in a constantly increasing ratio, since the growth of power and the acquisition of material mutually strengthen and enlarge each other. That in children there is not a mechanical learning of language, but a development of linguistic power, is also proved by the fact that, since the major abilities of man 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 time-span. But how could the hearer gain mastery over the spoken word, solely through the growth of that power of his own, developing in isolation within him, if there were not in both speaker and hearer the same essence, merely segregated individually and appropriately to each, so that a signal so fine, yet created from the very deepest and most intrinsic nature of that essence, as is the articulate sound, is enough to stir both parties, by its transmission, in a matching way?

One might wish to object to the foregoing that the children of any people, when displaced to an alien community before learning to speak, develop their linguistic abilities in the latter's tongue. This

undeniable fact, we might say, is a clear proof that language is merely an echoing of what is heard, and depends entirely on social circumstances, without regard for any unity or diversity of the essence. In cases of this kind, however, it has hardly been possible to observe with sufficient accuracy how laboriously the native pattern has had to be overcome, or how perhaps in the finest nuances it has still kept its ground unvanquished. But even without paying attention to this, the phenomenon in question is sufficiently explained by the fact that man is everywhere one with man, and development of the ability to use language can therefore go on with the aid of every given individual. It occurs no less, on that account, from within one's own self; only because it always needs an outer stimulus as well, must it prove analogous to what it actually experiences, and can do so in virtue of the congruence of all human tongues. But the power of descent upon these can be seen, nonetheless, with sufficient clarity, in their distribution by nations. It is also readily intelligible in itself, since descent has so predominantly powerful an effect on the whole individuality, and the particular language at any time is again most intimately connected with this. If language, by its origin from the depths of man's nature, did not also enter into true and authentic combination with physical descent, why otherwise, for both cultured and uncultured alike, would the native tongue possess a strength and intimacy so much greater than any foreign one, that after long abstinence it greets the ear with a sort of sudden magic, and awakens longing when far from home? This obviously does not depend upon its mental content, the thought or emotion expressed, but rather on the very thing that is least explicable and most individual, its sound; it is as if we were perceiving, in the native tongue, a portion of ourselves.

The picture of language as designating merely *objects*, already perceived in themselves, is also disconfirmed by examination of what language engenders as its product. By means of such a picture we would never, in fact, exhaust the deep and full content of language. Just as no concept is possible without language, so also there can be no object for the mind, since it is only through the concept, of course, that anything external acquires full being for consciousness. But the whole mode of *perceiving* things *subjectively* necessarily passes over into cultivation and the use of language. For the *word* arises from this very perceiving; it is a copy, not of the object in itself, but of the image thereof produced in consciousness. Since all objective perception is inevitably tinged with *subjectivity*, we may consider every human individual, even apart from language, as a unique aspect of the world-view. But he becomes still more of one through language, since

as we shall see later, by an added meaning of its own the word constitutes itself an object for the mind, and superimposes a new character. Via the latter, *qua* character of a speech-sound, a pervasive analogy necessarily prevails in the same language; and since a like subjectivity also affects language in the same notion, there resides in every language a characteristic *world-view*. As the individual sound stands between man and the object, so the entire language steps in between him and the nature that operates, both inwardly and outwardly, upon him. He surrounds himself with a world of sounds, so as to take up and process within himself the world of objects. These expressions in no way outstrip the measure of the simple truth. Man lives primarily with objects, indeed, since feeling and acting in him depend on his presentations, he actually does so exclusively, as language presents them to him. By the same act whereby he spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it, and every language draws about the people that possesses it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one. To learn a *foreign language* should therefore be to acquire a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed, and in fact to a certain extent is so, since every language contains the whole conceptual fabric and mode of presentation of a portion of mankind. But because we always carry over, more or less, our own world-view, and even our own language-view, this outcome is not purely and completely experienced.

Even the *beginnings of language* should not be thought restricted to so meagre a stock of words as is commonly supposed when, instead of seeking its inception in the original summons to free human *sociality*, we attribute it primarily to the need for mutual *assistance*, and project mankind into an imagined state of nature. Both are among the most erroneous views that can be taken about language. Man is not so needy, and to render assistance, unarticulated sounds would have sufficed. Even in its beginnings, language is human throughout, and is extended unthinkingly to all objects of casual sense perception and inner concern. Even the languages of so-called *savages*, who would have, after all, to come closer to such a state of nature, exhibit, in fact, a wealth and multiplicity of expressions that everywhere exceeds what is required. Words well up freely from the breast, without necessity or intent, and there may well have been no wandering horde in any desert that did not already have its own songs. For man, as a species, is a singing creature, though the notes, in his case, are also coupled with thought.

But language does not merely implant an indefinable multitude of *material elements* out of nature into the soul; it also supplies the latter

with that which confronts us from the totality as *form*. *Nature* unfolds before us a many-hued and, by all sensory impressions, a diverse manifold, suffused with a luminous clarity. Our subsequent reflection discovers therein a *regularity* congenial to our mental form. Aside from the bodily existence of things, their outlines are clothed, like a magic intended for man alone, with external beauty, in which regularity and sensory material enter an alliance that still remains inexplicable to us, in that we are seized and carried away by it. All this we find again in analogous harmonies within language, and language is able to depict it. For in passing, by means of it, into a world of sounds, we do not abandon the world that really surrounds us. The regularity of language's own structure is akin to that of nature; and in thereby arousing man in the activity of his highest and most human powers, it also brings him closer, as such, to an understanding of the formal impress of nature, since, the latter, too, can after all be regarded simply as a development of mental powers. Through the rhythmical and musical form whose linkages are peculiar to sound, language enhances the impression of beauty in nature, transposing it into another sphere, but acts, even independently of this, through the mere cadence of speech upon the temper of the soul.

What is *uttered* at any time differs from *language*, as the body of its products; and before leaving the present section, we must take time to examine this difference more closely. A language, in its whole compass, contains everything that it has transformed into sounds. But just as the matter of thinking, and the infinity of its combinations, can never be exhausted, so it is equally impossible to do this with the mass of what calls for designation and connection in language. In addition to its already formed elements, language also consists, before all else, of methods for carrying forward the work of the mind, to which it prescribes the path and the form. The elements, once firmly fashioned, constitute, indeed, a relatively dead mass, but one which bears within itself the living seed of a never-ending determinability. At every single point and period, therefore, language, like nature itself, appears to man – in contrast to all else that he has already known and thought of – as an inexhaustible storehouse, in which the mind can always discover something new to it, and feeling perceive what it has not yet felt in this way. In every treatment of language by a genuinely new and great talent, this phenomenon is evinced in reality; and in order to encourage him in the constant labour of his intellectual struggle, and progressive unfolding of his mental life, man does in fact require that, beyond the field of past achievements, a vista should remain open to him into an infinite mass that still waits to

be gradually unravelled. But language contains at the same time, in two directions, a dark unrevealed depth. For rearwards, even, it flows out from an unknown wealth that is still to a certain extent discernible, but then closes off, leaving only a sense of its unfathomability. For us, who receive light from a brief past only, language shares this *infinitude*, without beginning or end, with the whole existence of mankind. But in it we gain a clearer and more vivid sense of how even the distant past is still linked with the feeling of today; for language has traversed through the experience of earlier generations and preserved a breath of this; and these generations have a national and family kinship to us in these same sounds of the mother-tongue, which serve to express our own feelings as well.

This partly *fixed* and partly *fluid* content of language engenders a special relationship between it and the *speaking generation*. There is generated within it a stock of words and a system of rules whereby it grows, in the course of millennia, into an independent force. As we noted above, the thought once embodied in language becomes an object for the soul, and to that extent exerts thereon an effect that is alien to it. But we have primarily considered the object as having arisen from the subject, the effect as having proceeded from that upon which it reacts. We now encounter the opposite view, whereby language is truly an alien object, and its effect has in fact proceeded from something other than what it works on. For language must necessarily be a joint possession (pp. 56, 57), and is in truth the property of the whole human species. Now since, in writing, it also keeps slumbering thoughts ready for arousal to the mind, it comes to enjoy a peculiar existence, which in every case, admittedly, can only hold good in the current act of thinking, but in its totality is independent of this. The two opposing views here stated, that language belongs to or is foreign to the soul, depends or does not depend upon it, are in actuality combined there and constitute the peculiarity of its nature. Nor must this conflict be resolved by making language in part something alien and independent, and in part neither one nor the other. Language is objectively active and independent, precisely in so far as it is subjectively passive and dependent. For nowhere, not even in writing, does it have a permanent abode; its 'dead' part must always be regenerated in thinking, come to life in speech and understanding, and hence must pass over entirely into the subject. But this act of regeneration consists, precisely, in likewise making an object of it; it thereby undergoes on each occasion the full impact of the individual, but this impact is already in itself governed by what language is doing and has done. The true solution of this opposition lies in the *unity of human nature*. In what stems from that, in what is

truly one with myself, the concepts of subject and object, of dependence and independence, are each merged into the other. Language belongs to me, because I bring it forth as I do; and since the ground of this lies at once in the speaking and having-spoken of every generation of men, so far as speech-communication may have prevailed unbroken among them, it is language itself which restrains me when I speak. But that in it which limits and determines me has arrived there from a human nature intimately allied to my own, and its alien element is therefore alien only for my transitory individual nature, not for my original and true one.

When we think how the current *generation* of a people is governed by all that their *language* has undergone, through all the preceding centuries, and how only the power of the single generation impinges thereon – and this not even purely, since those coming up and those departing live mingled side by side – it then becomes evident how small, in fact, is the *power of the individual* compared to the might of language. Only through the latter's uncommon plasticity, the possibility of assimilating its forms in very different ways without damage to general understanding, and through the dominion exercised by every living mind over its dead heritage, is the balance somewhat restored. Yet it is always language in which every individual feels most vividly that he is nothing but an outflow of the whole of mankind. For while each reacts individually and incessantly upon it, every generation nevertheless produces a change in it, which only too often escapes notice. For the change does not always reside in the words and forms themselves, but at times only in their differently modified usage; and where writing and literature are lacking, the latter is harder to perceive. The reaction of the individual upon language becomes more apparent if we consider, as we must not omit to do if our concepts are to be sharply defined, that the *individuality* of a language (as the term is commonly understood) is only comparatively such, whereas true individuality resides only in the *speaker* at any given time. Only in the individual does language receive its ultimate determinacy. Nobody means by a word precisely and exactly what his neighbour does, and the difference, be it ever so small, vibrates, like a ripple in water, throughout the entire language. Thus all understanding is always at the same time a not-understanding, all concurrence in thought and feeling at the same time a divergence. The manner in which language is modified in every individual discloses, in contrast to its previously expounded *power*, a dominion of man over it. Its power may be regarded (if we wish to apply the term to mental forces) as a physiological efficacy; the dominion emanating from man is a purely dynamical one. In the

influence exerted on him lies the *regularity* of language and its forms; in his own reaction, a principle of *freedom*. For a thing may spring up in man, for which no understanding can discover the reason in previous circumstances; and we should misconceive the nature of language, and violate, indeed, the historical truth of its emergence and change, if we sought to exclude from it the possibility of such inexplicable phenomena. But though freedom in itself may be indeterminable and inexplicable, its bounds can perhaps be discovered, within a certain sphere reserved to it alone; and linguistic research must recognize and respect the phenomenon of freedom, but also be equally careful in tracing its limits.

The *articulated sound*, the foundation and essence of all speech, is extorted by man from his physical organs through an impulse of his soul, and the animal would be able to do likewise, if it were animated by the same urge. Already in its first and most indispensable elements, language is so utterly and exclusively rooted in man's spiritual nature, that its permeation is sufficient, though necessary, to transform the animal sound into the articulated one. For the *intent* and capacity to *signify*, and not just in general, but specifically by presentation of a *thought*, is the only thing that constitutes the articulated sound, and nothing else can be stated to describe its difference from the *animal cry*, on the one hand, and the *musical tone* on the other. It cannot be described by reference to its *constitution*, but only by the *way it is produced*, and this is not due to any incapacity on our part, but is typical of its very nature, since it is nothing else but the soul's *intention* to utter it, and contains only so much of the *physical* as external perception cannot do without.

This physical element, the *audible sound*, can even be in some degree separated from it, thereby bringing out the *articulation* more purely still. This can be observed in *deaf-mutes*. All access by ear is closed to them, but they learn to understand what is said from the movement of the speaker's vocal organs, and from writing, whose essence already consists wholly of articulation; and they speak themselves, when guided as to the position and motion of their vocal organs. This can only come about through the power of articulation that is present even in them, in that through the connection of *their* thought with *their* vocal organs they learn to divine in *another* from the one component, the movement of his vocal organs, the other component, his thought. The tone heard by us is disclosed to them through the position and motion of the organs and the accompanying script; by eye, and the strained endeavour to speak themselves, they grasp its articulation without the noise of it. A remarkable decomposition of the articulated sound therefore takes place in them. Since they read and write alphabetically, and themselves learn to speak, they really understand the language, and are not merely acquainted with ideas inspired by signs or pictures. They learn to speak not merely because they possess reason, as other men do, but quite especially because they also have the capacity for speech, a congruence of their thought with their vocal organs, and the urge