

# The Theory of Linguistic Worldview by Wilhelm Von Humboldt and Its Connection with the Culture of Sign Language

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**Abstract**—The article discusses connection between artistic imagination and linguistic thinking. Special attention is paid to Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of language, as well as to the connection between the terms "linguistic worldview" and "in-depth grammar" with the sign language.

**Keywords**—*imagination; thought; speech; inner speech; sign language; in-depth grammar; Wilhelm von Humboldt*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the linguistic worldview was introduced by Wilhelm von Humboldt and was developed further in the theories of cultural sciences. His theories caused development of different directions in art history and introduction of the "in-depth grammar" and "symbolic form" concepts. The structure of the sign language incorporates all these principles and concepts.

## II. CONNECTION BETWEEN ARTISTIC IMAGINATION AND LINGUISTIC THINKING

Artistic imagination, a process associated with cognitive activity, has to do with the transformation of images and creation of the new ones using the initial ones as the basis of creation. Development of the artistic imagination can be called a new understanding about old objects, and this process is associated with the universal human experience. This way artistic imagination is connected with an artist's personality, his choice and his means of thinking.

Creation of a meaning of a word is an act of thinking, it can be viewed both as an act of thinking and speech. A word is a unit of verbal thinking.

According to Jean Piaget, mental activity is not logical on its own. Logical activity is a search for truth and finding a solution depends on imagination while the need for logical activity appears quite late. A thought appears before a search for truth. [4, 372]

Looking further into Piaget's idea, Vygotsky comes to a conclusion that thinking and imagination in its development are the opposites of each other, however, they are united by a concept of generalization, the first idea formed by a human.

"This indicates unity of the opposites, their bifurcation, a zigzag development of thinking and imagination, indicating in its turn that any generalization is, on the one hand, a departure from life, and on the other hand, a deeper and more correct depiction of this very life, that there is a certain piece of imagination in every general concept. All this allows investigating the actual path of learning about realistic and autistic thinking" [1, 56].

According to Vygotsky, a word and its meaning are in fact generalizations in its hidden form. "But any generalization, as it can be easily seen, is a verbal act of thought in its extraordinary form, reflecting reality in a completely different way than it is perceived in actual feelings and perceptions". Existence of so-called "dialectical leap" between a feeling and a thought indicates that "in our mind thinking reflects reality in a different way than our perception. Apparently, there is proof allowing us to assume that this difference is in substance a generalized reflection of reality" [1, 14].

Art can also be called a reflection of reality. Wilhelm von Humboldt connects art with the ability to make the "power of imagination" be productive. Any painting is a result of an artist's imagination and at the same time it is addressed to a viewer's imagination. In order for a viewer (or a reader) to imagine an object exactly the way an artist wanted it, this object should appear in his imagination. Thanks to this transformation process of an object into an image, an object goes to a new level. This way a reality transformed by art into "pure imagination" becomes ideal.

According to Humboldt, the most perfect artistic image is an image that connects simple and high, individual and ideal. And the most general goal of art is the desire to transform reality into an image. This can be achieved with the help of imagination as nature is only an "object of sensuous contemplation", that is why "an artist should erase any memory of reality while keeping his imagination lively and cheerful" [3, 168].

According to Humboldt, nature is beautiful only to the extent of one's imagination because while reality appeals to the senses the art appeals to the imagination. As an artist turns nature into a piece of art, in this sense art is the nature

pictured using the "power of imagination". An artist's task is to closely and in a diversified manner connect a human with nature.

### III. WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Humboldt expresses an idea that art reflects "external forms" of the world and thus creates "internal forms" for a human being. This view is close to the concept of a language's inner form. This way, Humboldt's aesthetic experiments revealed a concept which then became the basis of his theory of language.

Humboldt was the founder of modern linguistics. Development of his philosophy of language was going in line with the development of German classical philosophy and of contemporary for him aesthetics. According to Humboldt, in the course of its development language is close to art, because it is not just a tool of communication but also a product of the human mind.

According to Humboldt, the essence of language is "to form thoughts out of materialistic world of things and phenomena. A functioning language tends to become formal, and given that the words replace things, the words, same as the matter, should get a form to which they will be subjects to. Wherein the form is understood mentally or through the word itself, which is considered as a material" [2, 315].

Humboldt's understanding was that language is a world located between the outer world and the inner world of a human. Words arise from a natural feeling of a speaker and are understood through the natural feelings of a listener.

According to Humboldt, language is an intermediary between a fact and an idea; it is a tool for creating a character. Initially in a language "a human is looking to find a symbol with the help of which and adding the elements of his thoughts he could present something whole as a set of unities" [2, 301]. At the same time a language is an addition to a thought, with its help a thought turns impressions from the outside world into clear concepts.

An idea allows usage of the outside world's objects as material for thinking, which does not need any real object, but only creates certain connections. An idea gets a clear shape because of a word, which consists of sounds, can be close in meaning to other similar words. Each word has various feelings, images and associations attached to it based on its meaning.

A word is not a depiction of an object it represents, and for one's mind and imagination it does not replace the object itself. A word differs from an image by its ability to represent an object from different points of view and in different ways; it also has its own distinct sensual image.

A word has a very special essence, similar to a work of art because in its "sensual, borrowed from nature form it expresses an idea that exists outside of any nature; however, this happens only when the differences are obvious" [2, 306]. A word is perceived by Humboldt as a "sensuous form" which shows how an object should be presented for thinking. It comes from an independent "act of spirit" and together

with other elements of a language leads to an understanding of the external world's elements.

Humboldt considers languages as a work of the spirit because creation of language was caused by the internal human need; language is not only a tool of communication but also a tool necessary for the development of spiritual strength and ideology.

Where one reaches the heights and the depths of a research, mechanical and logical reasoning stops its existence, easily separable from each identity, and at this point one gets an inner perception and the process of creation, where it becomes obvious that the objective truth comes from the strength fullness of an individual. This is possible only with the help of language and through language.

Science and art appear when "human imaginations" are formed. This happens with the help of "spiritual power" which follows its own laws and forms of meditation. The spiritual power also influences the formation of a character. The language and the character are in close cooperation. It is the character who "unites the separated sides of the human spirit, giving them, same way as art does, a whole image that is seen by the mind as a complete unity of mind, and at the same time becoming more and more visible from the most intimate depths with all of its features". This whole image can be embodied only by language [2, 55].

According to Humboldt human's language is its spirit, and vice versa. Since Humboldt views language as activity itself, for him it is a constant work of spirit aimed at making a sound suitable for the expression of a thought.

The matter of a language is not only a sound, but also "a spectrum of sensory impressions and involuntary movements of spirit prior to the formation of a concept, which is all done with the help of a language" [2, 73].

Humboldt compares language with art as a painter or a sculptor connects an idea with the matter, and language - a product of spiritual power - is also a result of synthesis, which arises from the spirituality typical for a vibrant force. Humboldt compares the sound system of a language with the colors in paintings, as a thought in sounds gets a more vivid color than simply an undeveloped thought.

According to Humboldt, "an artistic creative principle is formed in a language, and in fact it belongs to the language itself, because its concepts get tonal embodiment, and thus the harmony of all spiritual forces is combined here with a musical element, which, once a part of a language, does not lose its nature, but only modifies it" [2, 109]. That is why the artistic beauty of a language is a necessity of his inner excellence, as the work of spirit is enhanced by the beautiful.

Humboldt compares the language of the Greeks and their art. Viewing the ancient times as the ideal ones he views writing, art and all the activities of the Greeks as an example of "the sublime human nature" and an example to be followed.

According to Humboldt, one of the advantages of the ancient Greek language is a sense of balance concluded in

the content of a word. This way a word with a meaning in it is a complete one, and imagination starts working harder.

The nature of language requires object's individuality, which is possible because of a clear description and depiction. In this sense, the Greeks, who were focused on the essence of things, had a language that was directed "inwards and to one's spiritual side". That is why Homer's poetry nature "is pictured to us in its full authenticity, any action, even a slight one, like putting on armor, is shown in its slow gradualism, and any description is always full of specifics, never being just a simple retelling of events". The Greeks were always seeking to find a character, and the search for the real character brought the Greeks to an ideal. This is where the perfection of Greek art comes from, which initially "came from the essence of any object and was achievable by artists thanks to the deepest understanding of reality and their desire for a higher type of unity required by the ideal" [2, 174-175].

According to Humboldt, intellectual activity and language are one whole. Language is a creative action of the spirit which has its own individual character in every language, when a concept and a sound are presented in a form of a word. This way, "reflected in a human, the world becomes a language that, placed between the two, connects the world and the human, and allows the latter to influence the world efficiently" [2, 198].

#### IV. SPECIAL CULTURE OF THINKING IN SIGN LANGUAGE

Wilhelm von Humboldt believed that a nation's spirit is its language. Based on this the culture of deaf people who speak sign language can be viewed as a special culture, not only in terms of language, but also as a special culture of thinking.

During his studies of the sign language and the behavior of people who know the sign language (both hearing and deaf), Oliver Sacks concludes that "gesture is a primary, fundamental language of any human's brain" [5, 49].

Referring to Humboldt who calls language a tool that "uses a finite set of resources in an infinite number of ways", O. Sacks refers to Noam Chomsky's theory that develops this Humboldt's thought. "Chomsky explored the "in-depth characteristics defining a language in general" and called them the "in-depth structure of grammar". The author considers these characteristics to be inherent and natural to the human nature, lying dormant in one's neural networks and waking up as a result of a language use. Chomsky defines this "in-depth grammar" as a comprehensive system of rules containing a certain fixed general structure, which structurally is probably similar to the visual cortex, the latter being responsible for all kinds of inherent devices used to structure visual perception. Up to this day we almost know nothing about the neurological substrate of such grammar. But we can assume its existence and location based on the fact that such thing as aphasia exists, including in sign language, due to which grammar competence, and only it, is affected" [5, 88].

According to Chomsky, there is a mismatch between knowledge and experience, as well as between grammar and lack of data it is based on. Chomsky concludes that there is an "inherent structure", which compensates for this discrepancy. This means that grammar is already incorporated in the human brain and is waiting to be updated [5, 89]. This way, ability to learn any language, including sign language, is inherent in humans from birth.

William Stokoe, who published his work "Sign Language Structure" in 1960, said that the symbols of the sign language are not just images but complex symbols with its internal structure. After analyzing the gestures he notes that the components of the sign language, in particular hand positions, shapes of the hand and fingers are similar to the phonemes of regular oral speech. [5, 85]

This way we can say that the concept of grammar and the "inner grammar" is also applicable to the sign language.

O. Sacks notes that the sign language is particularly interesting from the development point of so-called "inner speech" also analyzed by Vygotsky. The "inner speech" is an independent function, a product of thinking, thinking with the use of objects. Speaking develops thinking, language of communication triggers the creation of "inner speech", i.e. during communication we move from the external to the inner speech. "It is said that we are our language, but our real language, our real identity is located where our inner speech is, in that eternal stream of meanings that create an individual consciousness, an individual mind. Only with the help of the inner speech a child develops his own concepts and meanings; with the help of the inner speech he begins to understand himself and finally builds a picture of the world. In this respect the inner speech (or the sign language) used by the deaf is a very special phenomenon" [5, 82].

#### V. CONCLUSION

This definition is very close to Wilhelm von Humboldt's idea of a linguistic worldview. Humboldt defines the original form of uniting humans in a "linguistic community", understood by him as a necessary condition for the formation of an identity, which is closely connected with the development of language culture. Despite the fact that from the biology point of view language and thinking have different origins, development of an individual is possible only with the help of a language. Historically, development and exploration of the world was possible before the creation of language, but there were visual means of communication, which then evolved into the language grammar. This way, visibility is the primary tool for moving beyond the narrow thinking and a closed world. In this sense the sign language, built on the visibility, allows to develop the understanding of the world and worldview.

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