

Dr Liam Tiernach Ó Beagáin
School of Philosophy
University College Dublin

Goethe's influence on Wilhelm von Humboldt's Philosophy of Language

Presented to
The Romanian Academy, Bucharest
Wednesday, 13th November 2024

Abstract

Johann Wolfgang Goethe's (1749–1832) influence is clearly present in homologies of thought found in Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1767–1835) philosophy of language revealed through several observations that establishes the climate of opinion they created through their lifelong friendship. First, one of the closest friendships in Goethe's life was the one he had with Humboldt (1767–1835). Their first meeting was in Jena in 1794 through their mutual friend, the poet, writer and Kantian philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805). Goethe's final letter was to Humboldt with Wilhelm's last letter to him read aloud at his funeral. Second, their shared education from Schiller both shaped and confirmed much of their thought which was partially influenced by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Third, in what both Humboldt and Goethe would later recall as the happiest period of their lives, they formed the 'Jena Circle,' or what Goethe called 'unsere kleine Akademie' (our little academy). Fourth, as Goethe's comparative biology began to take shape, Humboldt along with his brother, the polymath Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), worked on a comparative anatomy with Goethe. Fifth and finally, encapsulated in his concept, *Urform*, the influence of the ideas that Goethe presented in his new biology are seen in Humboldt's most important insights on 'Language' (referring to both mental capacity and creative use). The parallels between Humboldt's *form of Language* and Goethe's *Urform* are striking and most certainly homological. In his concept of the ideal plant *Urpflanze* Goethe describes how all plants have underlying universal features. The *urform* describes the underlying productive principles that determine the kinds of organisms that are possible (cf. Magnus, 1906: 59). Humboldt's study of the diversity of languages argues in much the same fashion that all languages are only possible due to their being a universal 'faculté de langage' (GS, Vol. 3: 300–41). Unique languages develop in specific environments but all conform to the *inner-form* which is concerned with the Kantian investigation of how sensibility and understanding are united in experience. Humboldt's answer replies in Goethian tones that *form of Language* is both a productive (formally generative) and creative organ of thought (multiplicity of languages and language use). And therefore, like all plants conform to an ideal, so too do all languages conform to the ideal *form of Language*.

Keywords: *Imagination, Creativity, Urform, Comparative studies*

This paper discusses the homologies in thought from Goethe to Wilhelm von Humboldt. The study is chronological. Therefore, it begins with an examination of Goethe's concept of *Urform* and one of the ways this fundamental methodology took shape through his botanical studies which he cemented in his thinking in the late 1780's, particularly with his trip to Italy in 1787 and his extension of *Urform* to *Urpflanze*. After this analysis the study then moves to the question of the relationship between Goethe and Humboldt. To begin, there is an introduction to Humboldt consisting of his background and primary interests. Then, we turn to the introduction of Humboldt to Goethe by their mutual friend, Friedrich Schiller and the creation of what I call the 'Jena Circle,' which was made up of Goethe, Schiller and the Humboldts, Wilhelm, his wife Karoline and his brother Alexander. The study then turns to the education that Goethe and Humboldt shared under the guidance of Schiller which the analysis reveals was strongly Kantian. Finally, the paper suggests that 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 to say 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* (GS, Vol. 3: 300–41; Vol. 7: ??; 1999: ?). Therefore, Humboldt's answer to the Kantian problem is Goethian in tone, the *form of Language* is both a productive (formally generative) and creative organ of thought (multiplicity of languages and language use). Accordingly, like all plants conform to an ideal, so too do all languages conform to the ideal *form of Language*.

1. Goethe's *Urform/Urpflanze*

It was only after 1817 that Goethe assembled his work together in the fields of biology, botany and zoology together in a volume called *On Morphology*.¹ In the subtitle to this volume, Goethe defined morphology as "The Formation and Transformation of Organisms," and this, as we will see is something that Humboldt was very interested in exploring in relation to the nature of language, however, he never explicitly uses the term 'morphology' in his 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, (Magnus, pp. 58–9) 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.

It was during his trip to Italy in 1787 that Goethe's ideas related to ideal types began to take shape. The stimulus 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 when his trip to Italy takes place, he notices, for example, that

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. (Quoted in Magnus, 1961, p. 44)

¹ A term which he first coined and which is used in many fields today including linguistics where its first use was August Schleicher who was heavily influenced by the works of Wilhelm von Humboldt.

While initially he may have thought that he might find the archetypal plant in nature. He instead came to the conclusion, while in Sicily, that the archetypal plant wasn't to be found in nature, but that the idea of *Urform* was still a sound conceptual basis for the study of all plants. Therefore, he now saw his *Urpflanze* as an conceptual archetype to which all plants would necessarily conform. Writing to Herder from Naples on June 8th, 1787, Goethe believes that

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. (Quoted in Magnus, 1961, p. 45)

Extending these ideas further, Goethe makes 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 metamorphosis could be understood through the formulation that “All is leaf. This simplicity makes possible the greatest diversity.” (Magnus, p. 45) And as Magnus notes, “All Goethe's subsequent research in plant metamorphosis, in Italy as in Germany, merely elaborated from this single thought” (p. 45), wherein Goethe says that in attempting to explain the metamorphosis of plants his method was “the reduction to a general and simple principle of all the diverse phenomena to be found in the glorious garden of the world.” (Quoted in Magnus, p. 46).

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 recently noted that Humboldt, Originally wanted to undertake a trip to Italy lasting several years (following Goethe's example) (Berghahn, 2022: 10). But instead he had no choice but to go to Paris, which as we will see was beneficial in the end for Humboldt's 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 (Magnus, p. 38), 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, (Magnus, p. 58) 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 a continuous series (Magnus, p. 59). There were two series, the first was an attempt to compare different species of plants, while the second attempted to show the 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” (p. 59).

In the second series he suggested that there is a threefold process of unfolding and involution (Magnus, p. 49). To begin, there are small buds, then there is a process of expansion (Quoted in Magnus, p. 49) which is 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 necessarily seem to follow one another? His explanatory hypothesis replies that it is both a feature of the plant and the particular environment in which it is developed. In a conducive environment, the plant continues on these 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.” (Quoted in Magnus, p. 50).

By establishing these two methods of serial analysis, Goethe was then able construct comparative analyses of plants where he thought such comparisons were justified and in guiding these comparisons between plant life was what we may call the principle of “constancy” (Magnus, p. 60). So when he reaches the point where he feels he can make a generalisation this is on the basis 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 in order 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 Linneaus (Chomsky, 2009, p. 72). The *Urform*, in 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 – a brief introduction

Born in Potsdam, Prussia, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) was a philosopher, linguist, and statesman. Humboldt was the first of two boys, the second of whom was the famous polymath Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), who would become the founding father of modern Geography. Humboldt never had his childhood studies attended to publically and received his education from several tutors from an early age. Humboldt was immersed in the works of intellectuals from across Europe, including German thinkers such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), British philosophers like John Locke (1631–1704), as well as works emanating from French theorists like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714–1780) (cf. C.F. Berghahn, 2022a; Haym, 1856; Müller-Vollmer & Messling, 2022).

It was not until 1788 that Humboldt enrolled in public education, when he and his younger brother 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 (1724–1804) and from this point onwards became ‘ein überzeugter Kantianer’ (a convinced Kantian) (Trabant, 2022: 206). Indeed, his brother commented that Wilhelm might ‘study himself to death’ over the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A. v. Humboldt, 1973: 44; cf. Wulf, 2015).

Completing university in 1790 with a primary degree in jurisprudence, Humboldt briefly moved to Berlin, where, following in his family'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.

3. The Jena Circle

Humboldt spent the following years, which he would recall many years later as the 'happiest and best period of my own life' (GBH 10),² focusing on his philosophical work. It was during this time that he met Goethe (1749–1832) through their mutual friend Schiller (1759–1805). Along with his brother, Alexander, and other intellectuals like Friedrich Schlegel and his brother August Wilhelm, this group would form lifelong friendships driven by lengthy and spirited debates on multifarious topics that would influence each of them in their thinking (cf. Haym, 1856: 88–172; Osterkamp, 2022: 280–83; Mueller-Vollmer & Messling, 2022: Trabant, 2012; 2022: 198–230; Wulf, 2015).

Fuelled by a desire to be closer to the action, Humboldt moved to Jena itself in 1794, which within the walls of its university hosted other philosophers such as the Kantian champion Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1757–1823), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). 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, for whom all had admiration. Jena had come to be known as the 'Intellectual Capital of the World,' where 'the greatest philosophers of the age' were 'inspired by Kant's discoveries, [and] sought to outdo him' (Adler, 2020: 160; cf. Beiser, 1987: 145, 204, 236; Bernofsky, 2005: 86–100). And 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 and where according to Trabant he

findet im Dreieck zwischen Kant, Schiller-Goethe und seinem Bruder Alexander, zwischen Philosophie, Dichtung und Naturforschung, gerade in diesen »Weimar-Jenaer« Jahren seinen spezifischen Ort: die empirische Welt des Menschen und damit das man damals »Anthropologie« nannte.

(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.') (2022: 201, my translation)

In these relationships, the most lasting bonds were between Wilhelm and Goethe. Among the largest correspondence of letters in Goethe's and Wilhelm's corpus is between them and fittingly Goethe's last letter was to Wilhelm and Wilhelm's last letter to Goethe was read aloud as his funeral (see Adler, 2020: 218–19; Osterkamp, 2022). But, like Goethe, Wilhelm was initially

² GBH: Geiger, L. V. (1909). *Goethes Briefwechsel mit Wilhelm und Alexander von Humboldt*. Bondy.

attracted to Jena by Schiller and his journal project *Die Horen*.³ It was through this relationship that Goethe and Humboldt would form a strong friendship in a short space of time which

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.

(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.) (Osterkamp, 2022: 280, my translation)

Yet, Wilhelm and Goethe were initially drawn to Jena because of Schiller's 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.) which Humboldt would acknowledge years later in a letter to Goethe when looking back at their 'first shared education' (GBH 275–80).

Therefore, through Schiller, Kant's influence found its way into the collaborative discourse between the Humboldts and Goethe. For example, one of their projects during the period of the Jena Circle formed comparative concepts on the nature of anatomy that would prove to be of value in Wilhelm's later life when his studies were focused wholly on language. For example, 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., GBH: 140).

4. Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Form of Language*

Like all things, the Jena circle (what Goethe had called 'unsere kleine Akademie' (our little academy) (1980, Vol. 4: 291; cf. Wulf, 2015) came to an end, and by 1797 Humboldt, along with his family, had moved to Paris, staying there until government duties would call him to Rome in 1803. Despite the break-up of the Jena circle, 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; cf. Osterkamp, 2022: 281; Wulf, 2015).

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:

³ 'Horen' 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.

483–87; cf. Aarsleff & Logan, 2016; Losonsky, 1999; Müller-Vollemer and Messling, 2023).⁴ And during this time, he became increasingly interested in what exactly the character of a people is, his reply is 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, he would write to Goethe in April 1798, and echoing his friend's comparative work in biology he says that he is fully concentrated on 'studying the French national character and comparing it with the German one,' the result of which 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 was eager to define the national character of the Basques (GBH: 107 ff.) and the Spaniards (GBH: 127 f.), and upon his return to Paris he wrote to Goethe once more on December 6, 1800, believing that his anthropological observations were bearing fruit that would result in a 'treatise on national character and linguistic differences and their influence' (GBH: 140; cf. Osterkamp, 2022: 281)

But these ideas had been circling within Humboldt long before Paris. After a year long 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 18th century). This idea was to assess the different ways the human spirit had developed and from what basis it had developed, where he says

Es scheint mir nämlich jetzt mehr als je der wahre Zeitpunkt, Rechnung über die Fortschritte zu halten, welche der menschliche Geist und Charakter theils gemacht hat, theils noch erst machen muß'

(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; cf. Berghahn, 2022: 108).

For Humboldt, the answer to this question lies in the study of languages and how they conform to the ideal *form of Language*. The character of any given language is the truly creative aspect of languages and 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 believes that the great works of any society are what drive it forward and '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) that

one thing is ... the breath, the soul of the nation itself, and appears everywhere in step with it [...] - Language.) (GS, Vol. 3: 166)

⁴ GS: Humboldt, W. von. (1903–36). *Gesammelte Schriften* (B. Gebhardt, A. Leitzmann, W. Richter (eds)); 17 volumes). Behr.

Importantly, like Goethe's explanation of the developmental cycles of plant life, it is not only character which is important to Humboldt. 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 'the necessary foundation, in which the finer and nobler elements can take root' (1999: 148; GS, Vol. 7: 165). 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 he wrote called *Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie* (*Plan for a comparative Anthropology*) in 1795, which was during his time with the Jena Circle and which appears to be heavily influenced by Goethe, 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; andernteils weckt sie den Charakter und erregt seine Thätigkeit.

(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.) (GS, Vol. 1: 386, additions C.F. Berghahn, 2022b: 107, 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 individuals. For example, he is sure there are universal categories of Language and assumes syntactic categories like verbs and personal pronouns are universal. So, that before his study of language use (*vergleichendes Sprachstudium*), there is 'philosophische Grammatik' (philosophical grammar) of the underlying form that allows for use.

5. Homologies in thought from Goethe to Humboldt

Humboldt was first introduced to Goethe by Schiller shortly after Christmas in the New Year of 1794 in Erfurt (Losonsky, 1999, p. viii). 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 plantlife. For example, prior to his linguistic-turn in 1796, Humboldt wrote in a Goethian style on 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: 311–34, 335–69). In these essays, Humboldt discusses how Kant's philosophy might be explained by way of reproduction. The sensibility and understanding are united in experience, since in the first instance the sexes create

new life and therefore new thinking (p. 314), which he describes as the most ‘sublime creature’ of the imagination and extends this idea into a discussion on the arts and culture.⁵ 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 imaginative thinking, constructing one idea upon another in a process similar to crystallisation (Humboldt, Vol. 7: 165; 1999: 148; cf. Trabant, 2022, p. 198).

In fact, no conceptualised thinking is possible without Language since according to Humboldt it is the formative organ of thought (1999:54; GS, Vol 7: 53) which “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*” (1999: 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 is recognised in the literature as being Goethe’s influence on Humboldt. For example, Lydia Dippel (1990) holds Humboldt is in agreement with Goethe in relation to the biological basis of the activity of the individual and its relation to the whole (cf. Ladanff, 2011: 112). Susan Ladanff (2011) 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 on human totality (cf. Rost, year). Furthermore, scholarship in linguistics has noted similar influences. For example, Humboldtian scholar Roger Langham Brown (1967) 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” (Brown, p. 49). Furthermore, American linguist in the late 19th century Daniel Brinton argued that Humboldt “fully recognized ... a progress, an organic growth in human speech.” 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 [L]anguage in general that the species does to the genus, or the genus to the order” (Brinton, pp. 308–311, quoted in Brown, p. 48) According to Brinton “All languages are connected in Humboldt’s view in the same manner as the members of a biological family” (Brown, p. 48)

⁵ Kant was not particularly impressed with Humboldt’s essay (see, Kant, 1999). Trabant believes he was in fact “shocked by Humboldt’s somewhat pre-Freudian interpretation of his philosophy” (2015: 287). Nonetheless, Trabant is 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” (2015: 288). Moreover, Trabant argues that Humboldt clarifies the Kantian idea of ‘schema,’ which Kant 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: 65–6). 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.

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 "there are no single, separate facts of language. Each of its elements announces itself as a part of a whole" (GS, Vol. 4, pp. 1–34). That there are particular languages is as Brown says "accounted for in terms of the common human ability to develop and use language, and also of the particular history of national grouping of language users" (p. 49). But it should be noted that as early as 1795, Humboldt wrote to Schiller in what can only be described as Goethian in tone 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. (Humboldt GS, IV: 3, *our italics*)

Much later in the *Kawi Introduction*, Humboldt holds that languages aren't mechanical products. They are not artefacts of human history which are learnt by rote. Rather, they are organic activities that are in constant development. Like other faculties, Language matures along biologically predetermined paths, so that

[I]n 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 time-span. (1999, p. 58, *my parenthesis*)

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" (1999, p. 54) and whose underlying rules remain largely fixed and unchanging through an individual's linguistic development (1999, p. 53) 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

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. (1999, p. 53)

The human species has one Language, an underlying form, which in particular epochs among particular peoples develops in particular ways but which nonetheless adheres to the underlying form that guides any natural language along the paths of its development. So, 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.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the similarities between Goethe's theory of *Urform* in biology and Humboldt's later concept of the organic nature of his *form of language* are unmistakable. As noted in the 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 *Urform* is constant and unchanging, 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 [L]anguage. (1999, p. 50, my italics in bold)

On the face of it, we might say that these are merely striking similarities but when taking the relationship between Goethe and Humboldt into account, I think it is reasonable to suggest that the similarities in thought are not mere analogies in thinking but are in fact homologies in thought from Goethe to Humboldt. Before meeting in 1794, Goethe had long studied the nature of plant life and had come to the idea of the ideal archetype *Urpflanze* by 1787 while in Italy. Before his time with the Jena Circle, Humboldt had written nothing of significance, but from 1795 onwards he was writing on themes concerning human society that were inspired by Goethe's comparative approach to scientific enquiry. In the end, Humboldt devoted his studies to the problems of linguistics and approached those enquiries by investigating as many languages as he possibly could—his was a comparative linguistics. In doing so, he emphasised the diverse nature of languages which he suggested conformed to an archetypal ideal that he called the *form of Language*. A project which, in part at least, seems to have been inspired by the methods of his close and lifelong friend Goethe.