



KANT & GENERATIVE LINGUISTICS

ANALOGIES AND HOMOLOGIES

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PLAN OF PRESENTATION

Part I – Analogies

1. Chomsky's linguistics

Formal theory in response to 2 behaviours i.e., the creative aspect of language use & language acquisition

2. Chomsky's genealogy – a rational reconstruction

3. The central figure: Wilhelm von Humboldt

4. Placing Kant within Chomsky's genealogy (analogies in thought)

Part II – Homologies

5. A different method: Historical reconstruction

6. Kant's philosophical development

7. Hume's challenges and imagination

8. Kant's imagination

9. Kant's lectures on logic

10. The Jena Circle

11. Humboldt's linguistic-turn in Kantian Philosophy

12. Humboldt's influence on The American Humboldtians

13. Following Humboldt, anticipating Chomsky: Boas, Sapir and generative phonology

14. Chomsky's revolution?

15. Sociohistorical comparison between Kant, Humboldt and Chomsky

16. Homologies in thought from Kant to Chomsky

17. Concluding remarks

CHOMSKY'S LINGUISTICS

Response to the behaviourist programme in linguistics (B.F. Skinner, 1957)

Environment cannot account for human behaviours related to language: the creative use of languages and language acquisition by infant children

If not environment, then mind/brain

Faculty of Language: base component which is computationally simple, recursively adds one set of lexical items to another through the rudimentary mathematical process called 'Merge,' e.g. take one lexical item 'X' and another 'Y' and merge to form the set $\{X, Y\}$ and join to another, etc. (e.g., Chomsky, 2015: 207–08; 2008: 108)

The verb is the foundation of language construction – I will est. this as a homology in thought from Kant later.

CHOMSKY'S GENEALOGY

Focuses on the Enlightenment period

Is a projection backward of his ideas on Language and is merely analogical

Looking for comments on three things:

1. The creative aspect of language use

2. Language acquisition

3. Formal theories in response to (1) and (2)

Not looking for completed philosophies but partial ideas

E.g., Descartes qualifies on (1) and (3) but not (2)

CENTRAL FIGURE: WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT

Coined the aphorism made famous by Chomsky and generative linguistics that Language makes “infinite employment (use) of finite means” (Humboldt, 1999: 91)

Qualifies on all three points of Chomsky’s investigation:

1. Language use is creative since language can “only belong to a person endowed with consciousness and freedom ... and from the activity within that person” (1999: 214)
2. Children acquire languages not by “mechanical learning ... but [through] a development of linguistic power ... all children, under the most diverse conditions, speak and understand at about the same age” (1999: 58)
3. And Humboldt points to the mind as the reason for these behaviours “the *form* of all languages must essentially be the *same*, and always achieve the same universal purpose” (1999: 215)

PLACING KANT WITHIN CHOMSKY'S GENEALOGY

On being creative: "For the imagination (as a productive cognitive power) is very mighty when it creates another nature out of the material actual nature gives it ... in this process we feel our freedom from the law of association" (CPJ, V: 314)

On acquiring ideas: "When the logicians say ... that a proposition is a judgement clothed in words, that means nothing, and this definition is worth nothing at all. For how will they be able to think judgements without words?" (*Lectures on Logic*, 1992: 374)

On there being an innate capacity to which languages conform: If a certain word were attributed now to this thing, now to that, or if one and the same thing were sometimes called this, sometimes that, ***without governance of a certain rule*** to which the appearances are already subjected in themselves, then no empirical synthesis of reproduction could take place. (CPR: A100f, my emphasis)

Mosser (2001): In his general logic Kant "provides a set of rules for thought" and in the Critique he provides "rules for experience" and thus attempts to est. the logical conditions of mind that allow us to "express a possible judgement of experience" and so he puts forward "the minimal conditions for any and all such employment of language" (pp. 32–4)

PART II – HOMOLOGIES

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A DIFFERENT METHOD: HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION

Chomsky's genealogy is wholly inadequate by today's standards. Many suggest his research isn't really doing history at all (Q. Skinner, 1969; Rorty, 1974; Koerner, 2003)

Chomsky recognised this saying his genealogy is “very fragmentary and therefore in some ways a misleading one.” It is only a “projection backwards” rather than an historical reconstruction which would provide a “systematic presentation of the framework within which these ideas arose” (Chomsky, 1966/2009: 107)

But in agreement with some founding fathers of linguistic historiography (Koerner, Murray, et al) the field was in such a poor state that only a fragmentary genealogy could be constructed.

An historical reconstruction would have been “quite premature, in view of the sorry state of the field of the history of linguistics” (1966/2009: 57; cf. Koerner, 1989).

Chomsky suggests such a study could produce “the parallels between Cartesian linguistics and certain contemporary developments” which would be “rewarding in many ways” (1966/2009: 57).

Historical reconstruction is the focus of the research which looks at key figures in establishing homologies in thought from Kant to Chomsky with creativity at the centre of these investigations.

KANT'S PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENT

Early life: Discipline and rigorous training

Age 16: Enters University of Königsberg

Influences: Christian Wolff, rationalist philosophy and its lineage. Newtonian science.

Climate of opinion: Split between rationalism and empiricism

The biggest impact: David Hume and his challenge to the rationalist worldview

HUME'S THOUGHTS ON THE IMAGINATION

Imagination is a key faculty

From sense experience and immediate impressions

It recreates what it received from impressions into

1. Images (singular)

2. Ideas (recombined images recreated from impressions received through sense experience)

Imagination plays a pivotal role in his famous challenge to rationalism since it enables ideas of causality

Experiences → recalled through imagination → produces expected outcomes

KANT'S IMAGINATION

Reproductive imagination approximates Hume's imagination

A reorganiser of what Hume called immediate impressions

But the imagination has a transcendental role that continually conditions sensible intuitions so that they adhere to logical rules of mind

Productive imagination:

“A creative interface between the passive sensibility and the generative understanding” (Ó Beagáin, 2023)

The conditioning the productive imagination places on sensible intuitions allows statements to be judged and categorised into such and such concepts that correspond to things far more fundamental than representation/images (Plate/circle/roundness passage, CPR, A137/B176)

KANT'S LECTURES ON LOGIC

Lectures on Logic (J. Michael Young, (ed.) CUP, 1992)

We put our understanding of the world together through judgement of propositions which are necessarily centred on the verb and in particular the verb 'to be' or the coupla 'is':

'The apple is red,' "The dog was bold,' 'The weather will be good'

We create new concepts through such statements by way of the productive imagination that can create logically possible concepts regardless of reality: meaning \neq truth conditions (e.g., 'real possibilities' passage, CPR, A223/B270 ff)

P.F. Strawson Kant doesn't consider "the links between thought and speech" (2018: 95)

Capozzi (1987) "words are necessary for any thinking, even solitary thought" (p. 108)

Kant (1902) "We need words not only to become intelligible to others but also to ourselves. And this capacity of word use is language" (p. 839: my translation)

Kant places the verb 'to be' at the centre, highlighting the importance of the verb for conceptualisation.

Humboldt expands upon this key idea that become fundamental to comparative, structural and generative linguistics.

THE JENA CIRCLE: THE HUMBOLDTS, SCHILLER & GOETHE

Humboldt in and around Jena from 1791–97

The Jena Circle: Wilhelm & Alexander von Humboldt, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang Goethe – all had admiration for the work of Kant

Jürgen Trabant (Foremost Humboldtian scholar) Wilhelm “Found his own place in the triangle between Kant, Schiller-Goethe and his brother Alexander, and therefore between philosophy, poetry and science” (2022: 201, my translation)

Goethe’s biological concept of *Urform* and Wilhelm’s concept of *form of language* owe a direct debt to Kant.

Wilhelm’s emphasis of the diversity of languages argues all languages are possible due to there being a ‘*faculté de langage*’ (GS, Vol. 3: 300–41)

HUMBOLDT'S LINGUISTIC-TURN IN KANTIAN PHILOSOPHY

Kant's sensibility and understanding are united in experience through Language (a faculty of mind)

In *Über Denken und Sprechen* (1795-96) imagination is faculty responsible for creative acts

Language is not merely an instrument to communicate thoughts. Following Kant, he says it a **capacity** of mind. Furthermore, it enables thinking.

Later, Humboldt says that Language is the imaginative faculty that creates concepts through the sentence that create "closed thoughts" (1999: 128)

Language is "the formative organ of thought" (1999: 54) and creates "all that can be thought", since without Language "no concept is possible" (1999: 59)

At the centre of this capacity lies the verb and this becomes central to his study of Language as a formal capacity and in his study of the diversity of languages.

HUMBOLDT'S INFLUENCE ON THE AMERICAN HUMBOLDTIANS

His bespoke approach to each and every language, reflecting their diverse nature was of immense interest to linguists in America who were studying Native American languages.

Humboldt's approach put the verb at the centre of each study.

This allowed him to show the different ways in which languages achieved the same aim: to conceptualise the world around them through the conditioning rules of his Faculty of Language.

Against Friedrich Schlegel's (part of his larger circle in Jena (1791-97)) typology, Humboldt offered a better approach that "compared aspects of language structure" and central to this was "the formation of the verb" (McNeely, 2020: 263)

Humboldt "emphasised the equal dignity of all languages" and this is the method by which those linguists who became known as 'The American Humboldtians' followed (e.g., John Pickering, and Peter Stephen De Ponceau)

FOLLOWING HUMBOLDT, ANTICIPATING CHOMSKY: BOAS, SAPIR AND GENERATIVE PHONOLOGY

Humboldt's monumental treatises on language engendered a tradition of the comparative study of language along anthropological lines. All these line of influence converge in Franz Boas – Bunzl (1996: 24)

Like Humboldt Boas:

Reject enforcing any prescriptive template of grammatical structure onto any new language of study.

This follows Humboldt's model which he most effectively puts forward in his analysis of Nahuatl – McNeely, this was “the first empirical application of the general, non-Indo-European linguistics he is often credited with inventing”. Boas follows this path (Bunzl: 65; cf. Boas 1889).

Boas and Sapir also follow Humboldt's ideas on the sound-form (the creative element of his underlying *form of language*)

Anticipating Chomsky, Sapir is first to develop the idea of the phoneme and show how they might be generated and joined together

This idea of generation is highly influential on Chomsky's mentor, Zellig Harris.

CHOMSKY'S REVOLUTION?

'Revolution' denotes novelty in approach and a 'paradigm shift' which is a 'discontinuity' from the 'normal science' (Kuhn, 1962; cf. Koerner 1989)

Chomskyan scholarship: It was a revolution & it began in 1951 with Chomsky's examination of a **generative phonology**

However, his research is more of a 'scientific evolution' (Kibee, 2010) than a revolution.

Chomsky follows insights on generativity and transformations already present in Bloomfield (1939) and Z. Harris (1951, 1954).

Sapir's work most certainly anticipates Chomsky's analysis (see Postal, 1964)

His originality is in his innate-turn but this builds on insights from those above. They did not happen in a vacuum.

SOCIOHISTORICAL COMPARISONS: KANT, HUMBOLDT AND CHOMSKY

All 3 are followers of the tenets of classical liberalism: human autonomy due to the species creative nature

Kant: we feel our freedom from the law of association due to the power of the imagination

Humboldt: follows the concept of *Bildung* wherein humanity should reach the fullest, richest and most harmonious development of the individual and the community, following Kant, he believes we are ends in ourselves whose organic development grows along predetermined paths but those paths do not inhibit our creativity but only guides it

Chomsky: The most obvious evidence that humans are autonomous is in our ability for language which following Humboldt make “infinite use of finite means” and this is grounded in innate capacities. In light of this, individual freedom is essential and ought to be followed in the ways that classical liberalism outlined

HOMOLOGIES IN THOUGHT

Innate and Universal Capacities

Kant: Innate cognitive categories that shape our experiences

Judgement through propositions which are necessarily linguistic with the verb at the core of this process

Humboldt: Directly and explicitly influenced by Kant. Makes the explicit linguistic-turn in Kantian philosophy.

Places Language as the imaginative faculty at the core of the mind ability for conceptualised thinking

Does so by making the verb the syntactic and semantic core of all sentences that generate 'closed thoughts' that range over everything that can be thought.

Chomsky: Implicitly influenced by Kant's ideas through the development of Humboldtian thought in linguistics. Like Kant believes there is an innate capacity that conditions how we comprehend the world: world conforms to mind. Like Humboldt, Chomsky places a Language Faculty at the centre of the mind/brain's ability for conceptualised thinking communication is only an ancillary benefit.

Epigenetic theses

The use of the verb in all three highlights the epigenetic nature of the capacities in the mind that enable conceptualisation and reconceptualization.

Kant: Knowledge doesn't pre-exist in the mind (rationalism), but nor is the mind merely 'filled-in' (empiricism). Instead, the mind continually generates and therefore grows its knowledge by synthesising data from sensibility with innate categories of mind.

Humboldt: Knowledge grows through the sentence which is the realm within which all can be thought. Languages shape thoughts and cultures, continuously creating new meaning. He rejects any idea of language being mechanistic, it is an alive, creative and never-ending process.

Chomsky: Echoing Kant and Humboldt's biological analogies, Chomsky believes language is fundamentally biological. It necessarily matures in the same way other biological organisms develop, wherein children develop their linguistic abilities to full competency by 3 ½ to 4 years of age

GO RAIBH MÍLE MAITH AGAIBH (THANK YOU ALL VERY MUCH)

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