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**Language and Linguistics in  
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Diversity and Convergence**



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## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GERMAN PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE IN NORTH AMERICA

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THERE IS AN URBAN LEGEND that the official language of the United States would have become German save for one crucial vote. In some versions, the measure failed because a statesman happened to have gone to the restroom due to indigestion.

As a Germanist, I can attest to the strength of this legend. Many new acquaintances, learning of my profession, will ask me about this, often seeking confirmation and sometimes, to their credit, expressing doubt—because it is a myth, although a very enduring one. The reality behind the myth is much more prosaic: on January 13, 1795, the US Congress merely considered a proposal to print the federal laws in German as well as English, and a motion to adjourn failed by one vote. The final vote that took place a month later actually rejected the proposal and was not recorded (Baron 2005).

I begin with this anecdote because it points immediately to two things that I think are relevant to my topic, nineteenth-century German perceptions of language in North America. First, it shows just how prevalent Germans and the German language were in North America—not only when the vote was cast toward the end of the eighteenth century, but also when the myth began to circulate in the middle of the nineteenth century. Franz von Löher, a German scholar who became acquainted with America during his travels here from 1846 to 1847, prominently misconstrued the facts in his German-language *History and Achievements of the Germans in America* in 1847 during a strong wave of German immigration (Baron 2005, Löher 1847). Both proud German Americans and patriotic xenophobes have used similar versions of the story ever since either to emphasize German contributions to American culture, as Löher did, or to express anxiety over the endangered status of English as “the” language of the United States. Second, this story reveals just how unreliable such hearsay can be. Although it ultimately derived from a true occurrence, the enduring myth is far removed from that reality and shaped by the preconceptions of those telling it. In the same way, Germans’ perceptions about language in North America in the nineteenth century were not the same as the reality of the language situation here, though they bore some resemblance to that, and they were strongly influenced by German cultural prejudices. In other words, German perceptions about language in North America were culturally constructed.

Of course, German perceptions about languages in North America were inextricably entwined with perceptions about the people who spoke them. This interrelationship places the present study in the context of a history of transnational perceptions, currently a “burgeoning” field, which takes the cultural constructedness of group perceptions as a fundamental premise (Barclay & Glaser-Schmidt 1997:7). To understand how such perceptions

are generated, the authors of *Transatlantic Images and Perceptions: Germany and America Since 1776* recommend applying “the tools of historical analysis,” that is, examining these perceptions as much as possible from an evidentiary base. This means finding concrete documentation for representations of others in archival materials such as letters, historical newspapers, travel books and guides, and popular fictional literature. Sticking to the evidence, they argue, will invariably show that a core reality underlies perceptions, no matter how distorted these perceptions may be (Barclay & Glaser-Schmidt 1997:8).

The evidentiary base for the present study on perceptions of language is the same as for transnational perception research in general: a sampling of the personal letters that German emigrants sent home and popular fictional literature that depicts the language situation of North America; here I focus on a novel by Karl May. I have also added another level: scholarly perceptions of American languages—specifically, Wilhelm von Humboldt’s ideas about American Indian languages. Barclay and his co-authors claim that transnational perceptions are a grassroots phenomenon, and that the perceptions come from below rather than from above. Interest among German elites in the circumstances of life in America and in its indigenous populations was, in part, triggered by information from emigrants, who primarily belonged to the lower echelons of society. Moreover, they claim that elite perceptions tend to be less reliable (Barclay & Glaser-Schmidt 1997:12–13). Berger, in *Amerika im XIX. Jahrhundert*, a book that analyzes the image of America in nineteenth-century German popular travel literature, maintains that the work of scholars had very little effect on popular perceptions; rather, Germans and Austrians owed their knowledge of America above all to these travel books (1999:11). Still, I wanted to add the scholarly level, first of all because Humboldt’s views on American Indian languages give us a linguistic perspective lacking in the general statements of most of the letters and popular literature. Second, I wanted to test these views discounting scholarly discourse and ask whether continuities exist across the different levels, and whether such continuities came from below or whether scholarly discourse and mass opinion mutually influenced one another.

In fact, I did find continuities, which I will present in detail below, across the different levels of discourse about languages in North America that suggest some interplay among them. Specifically, all of the observers—the immigrant letter writers, popular fiction writers, and Humboldt—all looked at the language situation in the New World through the powerful lens of German Romanticism, which caused them to distort its reality in consistent ways: they believed in linguistic relativity; that is, that some languages were better than others and that they represented the intellectual abilities of those who spoke them. Thus, they believed in the inherent superiority of European languages and the inferior mental capacity of the American Indians; and they leaned toward the idea of one language for one nation, which blinded them to the real variety of American Indian languages they encountered. Moreover, I found evidence to suggest that at least some popular conceptions were shaped by scholarly discourse, so that perceptions are not necessarily as bottom-up as Barclay *et al.* assume.

GERMAN IMMIGRANT LETTERS. The urban legend about the German vote emphasizes the prevalence of German immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the

first US census of 1790, one-twelfth of the nearly four million residents of the new republic were of German descent (about 330,000),<sup>1</sup> although Pennsylvania was exceptional with thirty percent (or about 130,000) (Kamphoefner, Helbich & Sommer 1991:1).<sup>2</sup> The great concentration of Germans there caused Benjamin Franklin to complain as early as 1751 that they would overrun the colony:

Why should the Palatine Boors be suffered to swarm into our Settlements, and by herding together establish their Language and Manners to the exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglicizing them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion? (Labaree 1957–2007:234)

Franklin's anxieties about German clannishness and their refusal to acquire English are particularly striking.

Another man who would later become president of the United States acknowledged the tremendous number and impact of German immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1958, John F. Kennedy wrote of them:

Between 1830 and 1930, Germany sent six million people to the United States—more than any other nation... Almost every state in the Union profited from their intellectual and material contributions... German immigrant influence has been pervasive, in our language, in our mores, in our customs and in our basic philosophy. (quoted in Wagner 1985:vi)

Kennedy's take on German immigrants was notably more positive than Franklin's, but then, he was writing when they were no longer perceived as a threat to dominant American culture.

In fact, five million people had already emigrated from Germany to the US by the end of the nineteenth century, primarily to midwestern states and Texas. These immigrants sent over 300 million letters to Germany between 1820 and 1914, with about one-third of them personal in nature (Kamphoefner, Helbich & Sommer 1991:27). In an effort to make a sampling of these letters more accessible for research, Helbich, Kamphoefner and Sommer in 1988 edited a large volume of them, which was translated into English as *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home* in 1991. Now, however, the Internet has made broad access to such archival materials much more feasible. I also searched letters from German immigrants in the database, *North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories*, which encompasses over 100,000 pages of documents searchable by key

<sup>1</sup> The US population in the 1790 census was 3,929,214 (<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h980.html>, accessed June 8, 2008.)

<sup>2</sup> The Pennsylvania population in 1790 was 434,373 (<http://www.npg.org/states/pa.htm>, accessed June 8, 2008.)

words including countries of origin and heritage.<sup>3</sup> Finally, I looked at newspaper articles published by the Cotta Publishing House, one of the most prominent publishers in nineteenth-century Germany (Wagner 1985). Although these sources did not yield many observations on specific details of language, a number of common themes emerged that give us insight into the general perceptions in Germany about language in America.

Above all, the letters point to the great diversity of languages and cultures in the US. Most of them were European languages—I found references to Yiddish (Bruns 1988:94); Swedish, Spanish (Kamphoefner, Helbich & Sommer 1991:102); Mexican (Dressel 1954:81); Polish, French, and German, of course (Gustorf 1969:114); and Pennsylvania Dutch (Dressel 1954:7)—but the writers also noted “Indian language” (Wislizenus 1848:51, Bruns 1988:82, Dressel 1954:65), as well as an Indian sign language (Dressel 1954:65) and even a French creole (Dressel 1954:52). Interestingly, there were no references to Chinese in my sample, although Chinese immigration had become an issue of intense debate by the close of the nineteenth century, as witnessed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Daniels 2002:2). With this veritable Babel of languages, some letter writers explicitly admired the rare linguistic genius—those immigrants who mastered many languages and could switch easily between them. In July 1836, for example, one writer described the multilingual owner of a boardinghouse in St. Louis: “Now and then, [the owner] raised up from his chairs and spoke a few Polish, German, French, and now and then English words, depending upon the language in which he was addressed” (Gustorf 1969:114).

One could get the impression that immigrants needed to know many languages to succeed in the New World. But, in fact, most letters and especially immigrant advice literature indicated that the language of the country was incontrovertibly English. Moreover, they urged would-be immigrants to master it if they hoped to do well. In his *Advice to Immigrants* of 1851, F. W. Bogen put it most plainly:

It is well known, that the English language is by far the widest-spread, and, in the political and judicial life, the only usual language in this country. Whoever does not understand nor speak English, can make no use of his knowledge and abilities, or at the most, a very limited one... I could get no employment, I was neglected, little esteemed; in fine, I felt unhappy and forlorn. But as soon as I became master of the language of my adopted country, my troubles ceased... no immigrant who seeks his true interest... ought to hesitate for a moment in his endeavors to become master of the English language as an indispensable means to that purpose. (1851:13–15).

Other writers made similar statements (e.g., Kohn 1951:104).

Parallel to the need for English, a common theme of the letters is a sense of disappointment that German was not more important in America. Many writers complained of missing German (Kohn 1951:108, Hasslock 1951:276), and even those who advocated learning English did not wish to see German discarded. Again, Bogen, in his *Advice to Immigrants*, wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> Accessible by subscription at <http://www.alexanderstreetz.com/imldlive/>. The works that were published independently elsewhere but available in the database are listed in the references.

Having said thus much upon the importance of obtaining a thorough knowledge of the English language, the author by no means asks his countryman to renounce entirely his mother tongue, which is in reality one of the most powerful, rich and refined in the world, and one which has exercised a wonderful influence in civilizing the people, and brought to light excellent works, both in prose and poetry, and therefore deserves also in this country due care and attention. (1851:21)

However, German immigrants found it difficult to maintain their mother tongue, especially with their children. One man claimed that English was easier than German, which explained why his children did not wish to learn their parents' native language (Kamphoefner, Helbich & Sommer 1991:238). Others bemoaned the language mixing that occurred among those who did continue to speak German. A visitor to Pennsylvania in 1838 gave an example of the kind of expressions one could hear in its German-speaking counties: "Das horse ist über die fence gejumpf" (Dressel 1954:11).

As far as the Indian languages were concerned, it is telling that the writers did not refer to specific tribal languages but rather simply to "the language of the Indians" (Wislizenus 1848:51, Bruns 1988:82, Dressel 1954:65).<sup>4</sup> To be sure, most immigrants probably had little contact with Indians and did not encounter more than one tribe in their immediate surroundings. But just this way of referring to Indian languages suggests that they lumped all Indians and their languages into one large group.

In his introduction to *The Language Encounter of the Americas, 1492–1800*, Gray points out the importance of missionaries not only in gathering information about the indigenous languages of the Americas but also in laying the foundation of attitudes about these languages. In order to make the diversity of tongues consistent with the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, early missionaries viewed it as "an indication of social decay and human delinquency" (2000:9). Later, scholars of language drew upon these missionary reports for their data and transformed this Biblical idea into the hypothesis of linguistic development, wherein the American languages were assumed to represent earlier stages of human language (Jookin 2000:294), and thus earlier stages of humanity as well.

It seems that the letter writers had largely adopted this view of languages and likewise regarded the Indians and other non-European peoples as representatives of earlier, more barbaric languages and people, without, however, recognizing the diversity or complexity of their languages. Remarking on the French creole of some black workers he encountered on plantations in Mississippi and Louisiana, one German immigrant wrote that they "gibbered a language that entirely matched their apish faces" (Dressel 1954: 52). Although I could find no specific reference similarly denigrating Indian languages in my sample, I did

<sup>4</sup> To make sure that this gap did not result from my search terms, I also searched the records of people with German heritage in the immigrant database for some of the Indian tribal names, including Navajo, Apache, Ute, Delaware, Algonquian, Iroquois, and Shawnee. Of these, only the Delaware and Algonquian Indians were mentioned by name, each only once in 807 documents, without reference to their languages (Lobenstine 1920:101, Lips 1942:63, respectively). Curiously, the "Utah" Indians also receive one mention (Kautz 1978:216), which has interesting implications for my discussion of Karl May, below.

find a passage that used Indians to emphasize the lack of sophistication among the isolated populations of Kentucky—"These people appear less civilized than the American Indians" (Gustorf 1969:57)—a statement that again lumps them all together into one group. For the most part, references to Indians in the letters occurred in the context of discussing people who were killed or were living in fear of them, as one woman tellingly wrote, "I am a bit afraid of Mexico too, because there are still too many Indians living there" (Kamphoefner, Helbich & Sommer 1991:598).

The flip side of this stigmatization of Indian and creole languages, of course, was the belief that European languages were superior in form and corresponded to the more advanced civilization and intellect of its people. However, the German immigrants took it a step further: "...German immigrants... regarded themselves and their home country as the apex of culture and civilization" (Wagner 1985:ix). This attitude was apparent in Bogen's remark about the "rich and refined" and "civilizing" German language above, and other letters bear this out as well. A woman ship passenger on her way to America, for example, looked forward to opportunities to speak German, "our own dear language, so pure and uncorrupted," with fellow countrymen (Hasslock 1951:276). Perhaps this explains, in part, why Karl May, to whom we now turn, always made his Western heroes "German in their innermost hearts," regardless of their characterization in the novel or what languages they spoke (Berger 1999:80).<sup>5</sup>

KARL MAY'S TRAVEL NARRATIVE *THE TREASURE OF SILVER LAKE*. Berger argues that German travel books, especially popular novels, were the primary source of information that the average German citizen had about life in America. This travel literature achieved its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century, when it was read more widely than newspapers (Berger 1999: 11). The mass press did not emerge until the latter half of the century (Gassert & Hodenberg 2006). Of the many authors of popular narratives set in America, I chose to focus on May (1842–1912), not for the authenticity of his tales, which were often rather far-fetched, but because he was the most widely read. Still popular among German youth today, May's works have gone through more editions than any German publication except for the Bible and certain state-sponsored propaganda titles (Berger 1999:78). As such, his writing both mirrored and projected the German image of America (*ibid*).

Although May finally traveled to America in 1908, he had no first-hand knowledge of the country when he wrote most of his Western novels, including *The Treasure of Silver Lake*, which was published in fifty episodes in the serial *Der gute Kamerad* from 1890 to 1891. Rather, he based his image of the American West on that of his predecessors, such as the Austrian-American author Charles Sealsfield (the pen name of Karl Postl, 1793–1864), and James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), who popularized the Western genre in the 1820s (Folsom 1979:6). Despite the tall nature of May's tales, he placed great emphasis on their authenticity. In 1894, he began to claim that he himself was Old Shatterhand, the highest-ranking hero in his novels, and that he had actually experienced all of the adventures he depicted in them. In this same period, he also underscored this by changing the designation

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<sup>5</sup> Translation mine.

of his texts from *Reiseromane* 'travel novels' to *Reiseerzählungen* 'travel accounts' (Heermann 1988:240, Sutcliffe 1998:598).

May's quest for authenticity is important for us because it encouraged him to try to portray the language situation of the American West in some detail. In *The Treasure of Silver Lake*, May actually developed a complex system using foreign interjections, his native Saxon dialect, pidgin German, pronoun shifts, and overt narrator comments on language to represent the diversity of languages his heroes encounter without taxing his young, monolingual readers too much (Sutcliffe 1998). As a result, we have access to his perception of the languages of America, which was so influential throughout Germany.

Like the immigrant letters, May's novel presents a great variety of languages in America. There are examples of English and German, of course, but also Spanish (May 1989:48), French (276), and various dialects, including the Yankee, British, and Black varieties of English, and standard German vs. the Saxon dialect, as well as a host of Indian languages. In contrast to the immigrant letter writers, though, May did not lump all the Indian languages together but referred to a variety of them including Tonkawa (36), Timbabsche (an Indian tribe he seems to have invented, as it is only to be found in the context of May's novels) (588), Apache (590), Navajo (595) and the "Utah" Indian language (373). Moreover, May mentioned a sign language, specifically of the Utah tribe (537).<sup>6</sup> Although May got some of the facts wrong, he generally showed, with his representation of a broad variety of languages and dialects in America, a remarkable sensitivity to the problem of language as a barrier to communication in the New World, especially for one who had never been here.

Interestingly, May used the different characters' facility with languages to mark them as heroes or villains. Most of his heroes, including Old Shatterhand, Old Firehand, Tante-Droll and Hobble-Frank, are actually ethnically German, and yet all show a great facility for languages. Old Shatterhand, the greatest among them, is essentially a linguistic genius like the owner of the boardinghouse in St. Louis we saw above: he speaks German natively, has mastered English and several of the Indian languages, including the Utah sign language (May 1989:496, 537), and can switch between them effortlessly. His linguistic genius is even more remarkable when one considers the skills he exhibits in May's Oriental novels, where he has mastered Chinese and is working on dialectal variation (Schinzel-Lang 1991:290). The villains, on the other hand, get themselves into trouble because they lack linguistic and cultural skill. "Cornel" Brinkley and his men insult an Indian chief. The narrator remarks that this cultural gaffe would certainly have led to their deaths because the chief would need to defend his honor—but they were killed by other angry Indians first (May 1989:26).

<sup>6</sup> Here we must ask ourselves what May meant by the Utah tribe, since there are six recognized tribes in Utah, one of which is called the Ute. It is likely that he meant the Ute Indian language. Not only would a German pronouncing this word according to the rules of German orthography pronounce it /'u:tə/, but I find it rather compelling that the German immigrant writer Kautz (1978:216) also referred to the Utah Indians in 1860, suggesting that this confusion of the state with the Indian tribe was widespread, at least among Germans. Indeed, even today, the idea that the state was in some way named after the tribe continues to be propagated (by the web sites <http://www.native-languages.org/utah.htm> and [http://www.uteindian.com/ute\\_tribal.htm](http://www.uteindian.com/ute_tribal.htm), accessed June 26, 2008, for example), although the theory has been rejected (d'Azevedo 1986:364–65).

Similarly, the good Indians, like the Apache chief Winnetou, speak several languages perfectly including German, whereas the bad Indians speak “pidgin” when they try to address the heroes in English (e.g., the Timbatschen warriors talking with the heroes, 586–88) and otherwise exhibit a lack of cultural awareness. Chief Great Wolf of the difficult Utah tribe proves himself a fool for believing that English is the only language of the white men. He is stunned when the heroes begin to converse in German (421).

May’s presentation of languages in America thus reinforces many of the impressions from the immigrants’ letters. His ethnically German heroes represent “utterly assimilated, successful emigrants who have not lost their German roots” (Sutcliffe 1998:603)—thus presenting a model for other emigrants. They appealed to May’s compatriots’ pride in their language and culture and assuaged their fears that German would necessarily be lost in an American environment. Like the immigrants, May’s heroes also long for their homeland. Tante-Droll and Hobble-Frank, for example, two of the Saxon dialect speakers, fantasize toward the end of the novel about returning to Saxony once they have secured the treasure (580). At the same time, the heroes all speak English, even with one another before they discover their common heritage when Old Shatterhand joins the group halfway through the novel. Thus, English effectively functions as “the” language of the country—the default language for all situations when no other one is called for.

The difference between May and the immigrants, however, is in May’s presentation of the Indian languages. While May, too, exalts German language and culture, he does not put all the Indians nor all the Europeans into the same basket but differentiates between distinct good and bad Indian tribes, as well as good and bad white men. He does not judge people by the language they speak or their race, as the immigrants did, but by their ability to master and to be sensitive to a variety of languages and cultures. Moreover, May’s interest in the diversity of Indian languages extends to the point that he provides a classification for the Utah Indian language as “a branch of the Shoshonian part of the Sonoran language family” (373). Again, this information is not exactly correct; Shoshonean and Sonoran Indian languages today are two divisions within the Uto-Aztecan family rather than Shoshonean being part of the Sonoran family.<sup>7</sup> But May’s inclusion of this information demonstrates an awareness for the scholarly work on American Indian languages that was just beginning to appear in his day.

It was not until 1880 that John Wesley Powell published the first formal classification of Indian languages (Powell 1880). Powell distinguished a Shoshonean family of languages but not a Sonoran one (Powell 1891:108). But in 1891, Daniel Brinton, an American anthropologist, established the Sonoran branch as a variety distinct from Shoshonean.<sup>8</sup> It seems unlikely that May would have known this specific work, especially as it was published in

<sup>7</sup> “Uto-Aztecan Languages,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9074562/Uto-Aztecan-languages>, accessed June 10, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> See “Uto-Aztecan Languages,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This article cites Daniel G. Brinton, *The American Race: A Linguistic Classification and Ethnographic Description of the Native Tribes of North and South America* (New York: NDC Hodges, 1891).

the same year as the latter parts of his novel.<sup>9</sup> But there can be no doubt that he was looking to scholarly information, either directly or filtered through other sources, to fill in the linguistic details. Thus, he must have relied, to some extent, on the foundation laid by pioneers of American Indian language study, foremost among them Wilhelm von Humboldt.

WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT AND THE AMERICAN LANGUAGES. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), the famous Prussian statesman and educational reformer, is perhaps best known to linguists for his final tour de force, *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* published posthumously in 1836 (Humboldt 1988).<sup>10</sup> This lengthy title already points to one of his most fundamental and consistent principles—that the structure of one’s language affects the way one thinks. Importantly, these patterns of thought, Humboldt believed, were collective, each belonging to a particular nation with its own language. As he wrote of the emerging field, comparative philology:

The *comparative study of languages*, the exact establishment of the manifold ways in which innumerable peoples resolve the same task of language formation that is laid upon them as men, loses all higher interest if it does not cleave to the point at which language is connected with the shaping of the *nation’s mental power*. (Humboldt 1988:21)

Humboldt’s linguistic relativity at the time made him a pioneer in researching the languages of supposedly barbaric and savage peoples, including the indigenous Americans. Prominent contemporaries, such as Chateaubriand, ridiculed him for his enduring interest in these native populations. As an adherent of the Enlightenment philosophy of universal grammar, wherein individual languages were viewed as arbitrary tools of communication whose form was inconsequential to the message, Chateaubriand could not imagine a less rewarding endeavor (Trabant 1994:12–13).

Humboldt’s occupation with American languages began in conjunction with his brother Alexander’s research expedition to the Americas from 1799 to 1804 (Thiemer-Sachse 1994:257). A natural scientist, Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) collected data on the geography and life forms in the Americas that he spent the rest of his life processing. The grand work resulting from these efforts, *Cosmos*, remained incomplete despite the five volumes published before his death (1845–58). Alexander asked Wilhelm to write an essay on the languages of the American continent for inclusion in this work. In 1812, during one period of intense work on the project, Wilhelm wrote to an acquaintance: “I am busy with

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting, however, that May brings this classification in late, more than half way through the book, although the Utah Indians first appear much earlier.

<sup>10</sup> This work has been translated with various titles, but this is an authoritative translation by Peter Heath. The German title is *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*.

a treatise on the American languages for my brother, which he wishes to incorporate into his work" (quoted in Ringmacher 1994:36).

Alexander was crucial to Wilhelm's studies of American languages not only for giving him this initial impetus, but also for providing him with copious materials on the populations he had encountered that were not widely available (Mueller-Vollmer 1993:30–31). Moreover, Alexander's connections and high reputation among rulers and scholars in America proved indispensable to Wilhelm over the next decades as he used these contacts to secure more materials for his work on American languages (*ibid* 32). Finally, Alexander and Wilhelm shared a *Weltanschauung*—a similar way of looking at the world and dealing with the empirical data they obtained. Alexander's description of his philosophy of science in *Cosmos* applies equally to his brother's: "Nature is, for the thinking observer, unity in its abundance, the connection of the variety of forms and combination, a living whole. The most important result of physical research through the senses is therefore this: to find the unity in the variety..." (quoted in Bitterli 1991:472, translation mine).

On this model, Wilhelm had planned to write a comprehensive treatise on the American languages providing a unified conception of them followed by grammars and lexica of several individual languages. Wilhelm began this project in earnest during his appointment as the Prussian envoy in Rome with materials obtained from Lorenzo Hervás, an ex-Jesuit abbot who had been appointed the prefect of the Quirinal Library there (Trabant 1994:15, Mueller-Vollmer 1993:30). Although he repeatedly attempted to write this work up through 1826, he ultimately gave up (Trabant 1994:15). He did produce some grammars—his Mexican grammar, a grammar of Nahuatl, is perhaps the most complete, the materials on it in his papers having recently been collected into a coherent volume (Humboldt 1994). But he failed, Trabant argues, precisely because he was trying to press all the American languages into a generalizing mold that the facts just did not allow (1994:23). That is, like the immigrants before and after him, he tended to lump all the Indian languages together.

A couple of Humboldt's generalizations about American languages survive in his papers. In 1812, he composed an essay that set out his agenda for his American project, "Essai sur les langues du nouveau continent" (Trabant 1994:11). The second surviving document is, curiously, an English translation of a lecture on "the verb in American languages" Humboldt delivered at the Berlin Academy in 1823 (Trabant 1994:17).<sup>11</sup> The generalizations derive from his belief that the verb is "the most important part of speech" (quoted in Trabant 1994:18), the part that most clearly exhibits "the true creative act of the spirit," synthesis (quoted in Trabant 1994:20, here translation mine). Humboldt noted that the grammatical category of the verb was insufficiently developed in American languages, so that the pronouns become the structural center of the languages and whole sentences merge into single words (Trabant 1994:21). Unable to overcome his Romantic prejudice of the superiority of

<sup>11</sup> The lecture was not published, but Daniel G. Brinton, who published the English translation in 1885 (and who, by the way, is same American anthropologist whose classification of the Uto-Aztec languages bears such a striking resemblance to Karl May's description of the Utah language), claimed that he found the manuscript in the Royal Library at Berlin (Trabant 1994:17). However, Mueller-Vollmer, who compiled an annotated bibliography of Humboldt's papers (Mueller-Vollmer 1993), has been unable to locate the manuscript (Trabant 1994:18).

Indo-European language structure, Humboldt believed that these structural characteristics of American languages resulted in a lack of clear thinking among their speakers. As he wrote in the presentation on the American verb:

Nations richly endowed in mind and sense will have an instinct for such correct divisions; the incessant moving to and fro of elementary parts of speech will be distasteful to them; they will seek true individuality in the words they use; therefore they will connect them firmly, they will not accumulate too much in one, and they will only leave that connected which is so in thought, and not merely in usage or habit. (quoted in Trabant 1994:19)

It is important that Humboldt gave up on his America project because it suggests that he realized that the goal he had set for himself—a presentation of the “total impression” of the American languages worked out from the laws of a common analogy he discerned in them (Trabant 1994:15)—was impossible to achieve. His later work reveals his growing awareness that languages cannot be classified in the same way as natural phenomena because of their psychological and unique character (*ibid* 22). Thus, he overcame his Romantic preconceptions about American Indian languages long before the immigrants writing home about them for the rest of the nineteenth century.

**CONCLUSION.** The samples of nineteenth-century German perceptions about the language situation in North America I have presented here are very different in character and content, and yet they are connected by a common base of Romantic conceptions about language. Foremost, inheriting the prejudices of the missionaries who studied American Indian culture and language before them, Humboldt and the immigrants believed in linguistic relativity. May and the immigrants exalted German culture and language above all others, whereas Humboldt did the same for Indo-European. And all three adhered to the idea of a link between language and nation that predisposed them to see language as the key to understanding a culture. But these three samples call into question an exclusively bottom-up transmission of perceptions. Although Humboldt’s interest in American languages was motivated by his brother’s trip, it far exceeded that of the immigrant letter writers, and his realization of the true diversity of American Indian languages preceded theirs. Moreover, the groundwork of empirical knowledge he helped establish provided material used to create popular notions about the American Indian languages, as we saw with May’s use of information on the classification of American Indian languages that one of Humboldt’s followers wrote. Thus, some top-down shaping of perceptions clearly occurred.

It would be worthwhile to pursue all three types of perceptions and the interactions among them further—to determine exactly what scholarly ideas were taken up in the popular press and what sources May and other popular authors consulted, for example, and to expand the scope of the samples to include newspaper reports, more examples of popular literature, and different linguistic scholars. But this preliminary comparison, I think, can give linguists some hope that they can influence popular opinion, e.g., on the English-only

debate that continues today more than two hundred years after Congress voted not to print federal laws in German.



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