

**DANIEL
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**THE PHILOSOPHIC
GRAMMAR
OF AMERICAN
LANGUAGES,
AS SET FORTH
BY WILHELM
VON HUMBOLDT**

Daniel G. Brinton

The Philosophic Grammar of American Languages, as Set Forth by Wilhelm von Humboldt

**With the Translation of an Unpublished Memoir by
Him on the American Verb**

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On the Verb in American Languages. By Wilhelm von Humboldt

I. When the notion of Being is expressed independently.

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III. The notion of Being is present in the Verbal form only in idea.

Notes (by the translator) on the various American Tribes and Languages mentioned by Humboldt in the preceding Memoir.

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The Philosophic Grammar of American Languages.

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§ 1. INTRODUCTORY.

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The foundations of the Philosophy of Language were laid by Wilhelm von Humboldt (b. June 22, 1767, d. April 8, 1835). The principles he advocated have frequently been misunderstood, and some of them have been modified, or even controverted, by more extended research; but a careful survey of the tendencies of modern thought in this field will show that the philosophic scheme of the nature and growth of languages, which he set forth, is gradually reasserting its sway, after having been neglected and denied through the preponderance of the so-called naturalistic school during the last quarter of a century.

The time seems ripe, therefore, to bring the general principles of his philosophy to the knowledge of American scholars, especially as applied by himself to the analysis of American languages.

Any one at all acquainted with Humboldt's writings, and the literature to which they have given rise, will recognize that this is a serious task. I have felt it such, and have prepared myself for it not only by a careful perusal of his

own published writings, but also by a comparison of the conflicting interpretations put upon them by Dr. Max Schasler,^{[3-*](#)} Prof. H. Steinthal,^{[3-†](#)} Prof. C. J. Adler,^{[3-‡](#)} and others, as well as by obtaining a copy of an entirely unpublished memoir by Humboldt on the "American Verb," a translation of which accompanies this paper. But my chief reliance in solving the obscurities of Humboldt's presentation of his doctrines has been a close comparison of allied passages in his various essays, memoirs and letters. Of these I need scarcely say that I have attached the greatest weight to his latest and monumental work sometimes referred to as his "Introduction to the Kawi Language," but whose proper title is "On Differences in Linguistic Structure, and their Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Race."^{[4-*](#)}

I would not have it understood that I am presenting a complete analysis of Humboldt's linguistic philosophy. This is far beyond the scope of the present paper. It aims to set forth merely enough of his general theories to explain his applications of them to the languages of the American race.

What I have to present can best be characterized as a series of notes on Humboldt's writings, indicating their bearing on the problems of American philology, introducing his theories to students of this branch, and serving as a preface to the hitherto unpublished essay by him on the American Verb, to which I have referred.

§ 2. HUMBOLDT'S STUDIES IN AMERICAN LANGUAGES.

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The American languages occupied Humboldt's attention earnestly and for many years. He was first led to their study by his brother Alexander, who presented him with the large

linguistic collection he had amassed during his travels in South and North America.

While Prussian Minister in Rome (1802-08), he ransacked the library of the *Collegio Romano* for rare or unpublished works on American tongues; he obtained from the ex-Jesuit Forneri all the information the latter could give about the Yurari, a tongue spoken on the Meta river, New Granada;^{4-†} and he secured accurate copies of all the manuscript material on these idioms left by the diligent collector and linguist, the Abbé Hervas.

A few years later, in 1812, we find him writing to his friend Baron Alexander von Rennenkampff, then in St. Petersburg: "I have selected the American languages as the special subject of my investigations. They have the closest relationship of any with the tongues of north-eastern Asia; and I beg you therefore to obtain for me all the dictionaries and grammars of the latter which you can."^{5-*}

It is probable from this extract that Humboldt was then studying these languages from that limited, ethnographic point of view, from which he wrote his essay on the Basque tongue, the announcement of which appeared, indeed, in that year, 1812, although the work itself was not issued until 1821.

Ten years more of study and reflection taught him a far loftier flight. He came to look upon each language as an organism, all its parts bearing harmonious relations to each other, and standing in a definite connection with the intellectual and emotional development of the nation speaking it. Each language again bears the relation to language in general that the species does to the genus, or the genus to the order, and by a comprehensive process of analysis he hoped to arrive at those fundamental laws of articulate speech which form the Philosophy of Language, and which, as they are also the laws of human thought, at a