The rippling of *Verschiedenheit*: Wilhelm von Humboldt on philology, usage and intra-linguistic diversity

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s concept of desynonymization, although it has been said to justify the philological record of usage amassed in dictionaries such as the *OED*, can only partially explain the late-stage processes that result in diversity within a language. A stronger conceptual alternative to desynonymization can be found in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s reflections on linguistic diversity (*Verschiedenheit*) in his great essay of 1836. He supposed a criss-crossing of conformity and freedom to be the key principle at play in divergences not only among languages and peoples but also among individual speakers. The striving of individuals to join thought and utterance results in the modifications of usage and the varying fates of those instances of usage (namely their perpetuation or vanishing through time). The re-generation of language happens not primarily in the formation of new words or the recovery of old ones, but in daily use, in actions always subject to variation. It is exemplary use that extends the range of a language, not the imposition of a rationally improved vocabulary. The successes or failures of divergent utterance depend upon an ongoing wooing and winning and breaking of agreement about which words to use and understand and do things with.

For in language the individualization 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. (Wilhelm von Humboldt)

The English word desynonymization, invented by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is a starting point for my discussion. So too is a claim made by James McKusick about the implications of this term for the *Oxford English Dictionary* (and hence for any other English language dictionary of the sort that lists historical examples of sentences and divergent usages): “Coleridge’s notion of desynonymization came to justify the *OED*’s broad inclusion of variant forms and its careful discrimination of closely related words and senses” (“‘Living Words’” 11–12). Desynonymization, I will argue, though it may describe well some part of Coleridge’s own intellectual inclinations, provides us with only a very limited purchase on the late-stage processes that result in diversity within a language. It doesn’t actually explain the success or failure of Coleridge’s own coinages. McKusick performed admirable detective work in tracking down the many words for which Coleridge has been credited with a first known recorded use. Oddly enough, the great historical interest of the examples of usage assembled by the *OED*’s editors may have obscured the fact that in such instances it is a kind of action that has been so documented, a doing of things with words. Since J. L. Austin, in an essay such as

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“A Plea for Excuses,” was engaged in a process that looks something like (but is not quite the same as) what Coleridge called desynonymization, I will conclude with some brief reflections on examples, on action and activity in relation to acts gone awry or misfired, and on how the energy of “acknowledgment” (Stanley Cavell’s term) resides in ordinary usage.

The strongest alternative, I claim, to Coleridge’s desynonymization can be found in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s best-known work, the book-length introductory essay (publ. 1836) to his three-volume work on the Malayan languages. Its title – *On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species [Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts]* – gives first emphasis to his conception of diversity. By diversity, Humboldt meant divergences not only among languages and peoples but also among individual speakers. Of greatest interest are his reflections on the dialectic – or “criss-crossing” (37) – of conformity and individuality as played out in the variations of usage and the varying fates of those instances of usage (namely their perpetuation or vanishing through time). I argue here that Humboldt, because of what he has to say about intra-linguistic change and diversity (*Verschiedenheit*), is the key figure for understanding what the *OED* project became.

For Humboldt, the source of everything diverse in language forms or structures springs from the “inner freedom” of individual thought, which is intimately related to its activity. This inner freedom he also frequently calls the “striving” [*Streben*] or “urge” [*Drang*] of thought to find adequate verbal expression. Humboldt, like many of his contemporaries, took it as uncontroversial that the true end of man is self-development, or *Bildung*. As the young Humboldt put it in his treatise on liberal political philosophy, *The Limits of State Action* (written 1791–92; published, posthumously, 1852), freedom and “a variety of situations” (16) are the two indispensable conditions for “the highest and most harmonious development of [man’s] powers to a complete and consistent whole” (16). He does not say as much in 1792, but the “variety of situations” desirable for the individual’s self-development will also favor the individuation and modification of the linguistic actions that we call utterances. In the 1836 essay, Humboldt’s claims about changing usage are always consistent with the free “striving” of thought that he considers to be the cause of this and other always emerging forms of diversity within languages.

The various phenomena of individuation and differentiation that Humboldt considers in *On the Diversity of Human Language Construction* – the possibilities and limitations of spoken and written usage, the successes or failures of divergent utterance – seem to depend upon the always ongoing wooing and winning and breaking of agreement about which words to use and understand and do things with. They do not depend, that is, upon any universally valid set of rules. The sort of “agreement” involved here puts Humboldt’s thought into the philosophical territory of Kantian aesthetic judgments, or of Wittgenstein’s language games. It would be harder to make such claims for the philosophy of language of Coleridge, who never lost his allegiance to Platonic realism. “Inner freedom” was, of course, a very important matter for him too, but it was primarily manifested in Imagination, which he supposed tends toward unity – not differentiation, not separation, not diversity. Coleridge allowed himself to speculate (in a famous letter to William Godwin) that words might be things, but not that utterances might be actions. Word-things could, and should, be traced back to their origins.
The verb to desynonymize appears in a passage from Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* where he attempts to propound, with what he hopes will be self-evident and universalizing force (though his claim does build upon a history of eighteenth-century usage), the different meanings of the apparent synonyms “imagination” and “fancy.” In the chapter, he is making a case for the excellence of a (Wordsworthian) poetry of imagination rather than fancy. Coleridge admits that *imaginatio* came into English as no more than the Latin translation of the Greek *phantasia*, but adds:

it is equally true that in all societies there exists an instinct of growth, a certain collective, unconscious good sense working progressively to desynonymize those words originally of the same meaning, which the conflux of dialects had supplied to the more homogeneous languages, as the Greek and German: and which the same cause, joined with accidents of translation from original works of different countries, occasion in mixt languages like our own. (61)

Despite that initial supposition of a “collective, unconscious good sense” – and his own avid collecting of philological facts such as the seventeenth-century separating out of “ingenuous” and “ingenious” or “property” and “propriety” – it becomes clear not far into this discussion that Coleridge does not think highly of collective good-sense. Desynonymization, in our own time at any rate, is best conceived of as an instrument of intellect, a late-stage, conscious effort to improve a language, and so to advance reason, made possible by expert philosophical and philological detections and discriminations.

So too when desynonymize appears in his notebooks:

By Synonymes I mean words really equivalent, both in material meaning & in the feelings or notions associated with them / all which are defects in Language; but yet such defects as permit a progress in its powers … and by Homoeonymes [I mean] those words, falsely thought or carelessly used as Synonymes. – To make real Synonymes into Homoeonymes, is the privilege of Genius, whether poetic or philosophic, to detect the latter in the supposed former the province of the genuine Philologist – & this … constitutes what I have here called Synonomystic, or the process of desynonomizing pseudo-synonymes, and of determining the specific mode of the Homoionomy of each. (Notebooks #3312)

In a further footnote to the *Biographia Literaria* discussion, Coleridge wrote: “I cannot but think, that there are many [false synonyms] which remain for our posterity to distinguish and appropriate, and which I regard as so much reversionary wealth in our mother-tongue.” (63) This “reversionary wealth,” brought into English through the Germanic languages as well as the classical, and having come to light through increasingly sophisticated scholarly work in the preceding century, Coleridge sees as something more than a linguistic midden to be sorted through by historians of the language. Apparent synonyms deposited into English by a “conflux” of different tongues present the philologist with a relatively rare opportunity: that of detecting and distinguishing meanings without having to invent a new word (though Coleridge, as we know, was not shy about doing that either).

The process of desynonymization, as McKusick noted in the 1992 article, aligns roughly with Humboldt’s notion of the *energeia* of language, here in a late, less spectacular phase wherein usage and meanings may shift, but not sound-forms. In his 1986 book *Coleridge’s Philosophy of Language*, though, McKusick claimed that Coleridge’s concept goes beyond what had been merely eighteenth-century concerns
with tidying and civilizing the wayward tangle of the European languages. With
desynonymization, Coleridge formulated “a general principle of lexical formation”:

Both Herder and Humboldt notice that synonyms become less numerous as language
evolves. But neither Herder nor Humboldt give a systematic account of this process; they
mention it merely as a by-product of the somewhat prosaic desire for precision and
elegance of diction. Coleridge, then, seems to have been the first to formulate the
concept of desynonymization as a general principle of lexical formation. (92)

As I have already suggested, the cut between systematic Coleridge and dilettante-ish
Humboldt (and Herder) is not entirely convincing. But there is a deeper philosophical
issue to be raised here, which is that to divorce this concept from questions of individ-
ual and collective usage turns desynonymization into a pedantic if not trivial process.

The closest Coleridge comes to admitting the role of “inner freedom” in usage is
in the same footnote from which I quoted above, where he mentions a recent book
devoted to English synonyms, by a Mr. W. Taylor: “I found it impossible to doubt the
talent, or not to admire the ingenuity of the author. That his distinctions were for the
greater part unsatisfactory to my mind, proves nothing against their accuracy.” But
Coleridge does not intend the opposition between the satisfactory and the accurate to
carry any philosophical weight. It is bellettristic faux-politesse, no more. In any case,
as Humboldt puts it, the sorts of changes powered by finding this or that distinction
satisfactory or unsatisfactory are “… far harder to calculate than those of merely intel-
lectual advances, since they largely depend on the mysterious influences whereby one
generation is connected with the rest” (31). It would be a true “synonymystic” that
could reveal why some modifications of speech are taken up, and others left to lie.

Coleridge’s coolness to divergences and diversities of utterance in other writers
and speakers of English was not unrelated to his public disagreement with Word-
sworth in another section of the Biographia Literaria about where one might find “the
best part” of the language – in the jargons of philosophers, or in the dialects of provin-
cials. In fact, the theory Wordsworth formulates in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads
about how “language and the human mind act and re-act on each other” (Major Works
596) is very close to the “constant process of reaction or feedback” (Aarsleff xxviii)
that Humboldt will describe:

The soul must treat the word more as a resting-place for its inner activity, rather than let
itself be imprisoned within verbal limits. But whatever it protects and achieves in this
fashion, it again attaches to the word; and hence, if the mental powers be lively enough,
there issues from this constant striving and counter-striving of the soul an ever-greater
refinement of language, a growing enrichment thereof in spiritual content, which
enhances the demands made of language in precisely the same measure as they are better
satisfied. (On Language 93)

Frances Ferguson’s is the best account I know of why it was that Wordsworth thought
to look where he did for “a more permanent” and “more philosophical” (Major Works
597) English:

What Wordsworth describes in rustic language is not a specific diction or syntactic
ordonnance of words. Rather, rustic language is presented as a pattern of language which
is self-enclosed – not in its limitation but in its self-circling processes … It is not a
language which sprang forth fully formed and without check, but is instead one which
has refined itself from within – by bringing its words to the test of ‘repeated experience’.
(Ferguson 19)
Though this process might seem the very opposite of Humboldtian diversification, it is in fact an example of how speakers who bring to bear pre-existing words and expressions upon a new situation will modify and refine usage “from within,” as Ferguson puts it.

Clearly then what happens in the modification of expressions and words has much to do with action in particular situations: hearing and uttering again, or hearing and letting be. There is, in Humboldt’s phrase, a principle of inner freedom involved. To place emphasis instead, as McKusick does, on a Coleridgean “principle of lexical formation” misses how the energy of ongoing linguistic modification is the very same *energeia* needed to regenerate a language, to keep it going, day by day. Humboldt writes:

The vocabulary of a language can in no way be regarded as an inert completed mass. So long as the language remains alive in the people’s mouth, and even without considering exclusively the constant formation of new words and word-forms, the vocabulary is a continuous generation and regeneration of the word-making capacity, first in the stock to which the language owes its form, then in the learning of speech by children, and lastly in daily usage. The infallible presence in this usage of the word that is needed at any moment is certainly not simply the work of memory. (*On Language* 93)

That is, the regeneration of language happens *not* primarily in “the formation of new words and word-forms,” but in acts of daily usage, which over weeks and months and years become the differing usages of the generations, and the regions, and the trades and professions and associations. That the speaker is more often than not able to utter the word that is needed at any moment in a given situation *could* perhaps be taken as evidence of our machine-like capacity to generate syntactically articulated lexemes. But it would run against the grain of Humboldt’s thought, well expressed by the following sentences from the treatise of 1791–92: “Whatever does not spring from a man’s free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but still remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies, but merely with mechanical exactness” (28). Even in the curious last sentence of the previously quoted passage, Humboldt’s hyperbolic “infallible” invokes the possibility of failure, and so points to how a free “striving” for rightness or aptness of expression is internal to verbal action.

Humboldt supposes, as any poet does, that there are no true synonyms: not in the beginning, not in moving between languages, not even when the sorting out of synonyms or homoeonyms comes up between speakers of the same language. If we grant less credence to the idea of the synonym, then “desynonymization” will seem less fundamental as well. The meaning of any complex word is largely dependent upon context, which according to Humboldt means that the same word in different contexts is the same only if one takes it to be “the material sign of its concept”:

… no word is readily understood in the same way by different individuals, unless it were to be used for a moment simply as the material sign of its concept. … A definition cannot encompass [the words of different languages], in any strict and exact sense, and often we can only point, as it were, to the place they occupy in the area to which they belong … Among nations of great mental vivacity … this significance, if pursued into its finest shadings, remains, as it were, in constant flux. Every age, every independent author, involuntarily adds to it, or diverges away, since he cannot avoid imposing his individuality upon his language, and thus presents the latter with another need for the term. (167)
The process that Humboldt describes explains the individual drift and collective stabilizing of meanings better than it does anything like the “evolution” of a language. Humboldt’s phrase for what a strikingly new usage does – “present [the language] with another need for the term” – is a memorable way of describing not the formation of new words or recovery of old ones, but (more important for the diversification of a language) the extension of the range of existing words.

In his 1986 book, McKusick suggests that Coleridge’s theory is more hard-headed, less “romantic” than Humboldt’s language philosophy because it takes into account how “the merely functional” differentiations of ordinary discourse can be detected by “conscious volition” (97) and taken up within the synchronic system of a language. Coleridge’s theory got the nod for being almost modern, proto-Saussurean even. In making that argument, McKusick clearly did not have in mind anything like Humboldt’s crisscrossing of individual speaking and collective norms of intelligibility. The assumption is that cleaving to a word’s meanings by conscious volition is the only alternative to “functional” unconscious drift.

Humboldt’s theorizing shows, to the contrary, that verbal activity happens along a spectrum of more than binary possibility. Continuing to follow out the implications of “inner freedom” for the one who speaks, I turn now to a passage from The Claim of Reason in which Cavell considers the phenomenon of “projection” (what I have been calling the “extension of the range of existing words”). Typical of a thread of reflection running through all of Cavell’s book, the passage is occasioned by Wittgenstein’s various responses to a passage by Augustine on the infant’s acquisition of language:

If what can be said in a language is not everywhere determined by rules, nor its understanding anywhere secured through universals, and if there are always new contexts to be met, new needs, new relationships, new objects, new perceptions to be recorded and shared, then perhaps it is as true of a master of a language as of his apprentice that though “in a sense” we learn the meaning of words and what objects are, the learning is never over, and we keep finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed. The “routes of initiation” are never closed. But who is the authority when all are masters? Who initiates us into new projections? Why haven’t we arranged to limit words to certain contexts, and then coin new ones for new eventualities? (180)

Cavell’s questions ask, philosophically, about examples and the exemplary, about what constitutes the authority of an example of use (of a new use perhaps). If, as I argue, the philological record of usage amassed in the OED is not best understood by Coleridge’s concept of desynonymization, then we may want to ask what the OED can show us about the exemplary and the ordinary. Coleridge’s own career as an inventor of neologisms points to how it is exemplary use that extends the range of a language, and not the imposition of will in the form of a rationally improved vocabulary. The OED credits him with the first written use of hundreds of mostly abstract, Latinate and Greek compounds, dozens of which have been enormously successful, and that we could not do without; most of these, however, have never been taken up by his fellow speakers. Coleridge’s concept of desynonymization cannot explain the comedy-of-errors dimension of public shiftings of usage. It tells us nothing about the force of the normative, or about how the energy of language must necessarily, much of the time, fail to bind its speakers together. But nor perhaps does Humboldt emphasize enough how the action of speaking or writing falls short, or rings hollow, or makes a poor trial, how the modified utterance comes never to be “echoed from a stranger’s mouth” (On
Language 56). As Timothy Gould puts it in a discussion of Cavell’s philosophical engagement with theories of action, for Austin and Cavell, “the issue of excuses, of not quite or not entirely doing the action, is not simply a preliminary issue” (60). In the same spirit, any consideration of verbal action must take into account not just instances of the felicitous or infelicitous, exemplary or erroneous, but also of usage that is merely ordinary.

I would argue that the *OED* accomplishes one of the tasks that Humboldt charged philology “in the older sense” with fulfilling: to aid us in seeing how the “striving” of individuals to join thought and words causes diversity to flower in a language. Thanks to the work of the philologists who in the cases of ancient Greek and Latin literature have established “the linguistic usage of every author,” Humboldt wrote, it becomes possible to see that every language is “constantly under the dominant influence of mental individuality” (155). Philological work of this sort allows us to “learn all at once what [in instances of usage] pertains to the period, the place and the individual, and how all these differences are embraced in the common language” (155). Except perhaps in a tiny handful of cases, the *OED*’s histories of use support neither a theory of linguistic evolution (the view attributed by McKusick to Humboldt) nor even an after-the-fact vindication of the process of sorting out and discriminating the pseudo-synonyms of English by “men of research” (the view that can plausibly be attributed to Coleridge).

So what do those word histories support? Or, more basically, what do they record? Some are literary; they are records, that is, of exemplary use. Such examples are not merely instances, not models to be mechanically imitated, but examples of the greater demand any speaker may make of word and sentence, and of the greater degree to which such utterances may then satisfy one’s needs. Then again, many of the recorded uses of words found in the *OED* can only strike a contemporary speaker as odd, archaic, or unlikely to be useful in the contexts of one’s own life. It is the nature of philological instances of use that most will seem strange and distant. These examples are not exemplary. But nor would it be right to say that, as written or spoken utterances, these were verbal actions that isolated their utterers, or that the ones who spoke these words used them outside of ordinary “language games” or made themselves unintelligible to a community in doing so.

Something remarkable about Humboldt, especially in later in life, was his deep sense of the fragmentary, incomplete quality of any individual, and of any individuated utterance or expression, since individual existence, and the actions sponsored by it, will be “broken-off” by death. As Humboldt puts it, “the efficacy of the individual is always a truncated affair” (*On Language* 37). Only if one could traverse the historical entirety of a language (157) would one find the fragment’s whole. But the whole of language is never accessible to the individual speaker – not even to one who has, say, all the philological information of the *OED* at hand, since future forms of the language remain, of course, unknown.

Humboldt does not stop at this awareness. Always working through a dialectic of commonness and individuality, he recoils from the “might” and “infinity” of a language to contemplate the countering power of the individual speaker or writer:

When we think of how the current generation of a people is governed by all that their language has undergone, through all the preceding centuries, and how only the power of the single generation impinges thereon – and this not even purely, since those coming up and those departing live mingled side by side – it then becomes evident how small, in
fact, is the power of the individual compared to the might of language. Only through the latter’s uncommon plasticity, the possibility of assimilating its forms in very different ways without damage to general understanding, and through the dominion exercised by every living mind over its dead heritage, is the balance somewhat restored ... For while each reacts individually and incessantly upon it, every generation nevertheless produces a change in it, which only too often escapes notice. For the change does not always reside in the words and forms themselves, but at times only in their differently modified usage [Gebrauche]; and where writing and literature are lacking, the latter is harder to perceive ... Only in the individual does language receive its ultimate determinacy. Nobody means [denkt] by a word precisely and exactly what his neighbour does, and the difference [Verschiedenheit], be it ever so small, vibrates, like a ripple in water, throughout the entire language. Thus all understanding is always at the same time a not-understanding, all concurrence [alle Übereinstimmung] in thought and feeling at the same time a divergence [ein Auseinandergehen]. (On Language 63)

The limitation, the finitude, of each living mind is also its power over the whole, dead heritage of language. That is, the mode of action characteristic of utterance belongs to the individual (and not to language). Each individual has the potential to make a “ripple” of differently modified usage pass through his contemporaries and beyond. If that ripple returns, and keeps returning, the momentary difference becomes part of those larger possibilities of language needing daily to be regenerated. Action, verbal activity, is the perpetual cause of Humboldt’s diversities. Knowledge only ever returns us to the need for action (sometimes in a negative mode). For if all understanding is “always at the same time a not-understanding,” no amount of linguistic or philological knowledge will finally quiet a single ripple of Verschiedenheit spreading through the language. It can be disquieting to consider what I need from other speakers, and what they might need from me. Cavell, in The Claim of Reason, puts it this way: “acknowledgment ‘goes beyond’ knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession” (428).

Humboldt’s is an aesthetic conception of language. Along with the problems of such a view of language(s) – such as that some languages, and some users of language, are aesthetically superior to others, show more vivacity, power, grace, or whatever – one of the attractions of his theory is its premise that every human being, however gifted and/or limited by individuality, “strives” to find for his or her thought satisfactory, even beautiful expression in speech. One sometimes hears it said – as in John Willinsky’s book – that the OED with its selected histories of literary usage is a monument to “the poet-as-Adam myth” (107). The counter-claim is that a collectivity of speakers creates a language, not its literary writers. But this argument is another version of what I. A. Richards called getting the cart before the horse. It was, maybe still is, common to think that proper usage (and proper meaning) is legislated ex cathedra, by teachers and other figures of authority, rather than that those who present us with “another need for the word” (as Humboldt put it) gain linguistic authority by exemplary usage. To claim that the spontaneous creativity of the masses steers all changes in a language is merely to stand on its head the Usage Doctrine that Richards mocked.5 The more interesting question is why “we” recognize certain instances of usage as exemplary, and what happens in those moments when, as W. H. Auden put it in his elegy for Yeats, “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living.” It is this always ongoing process, what Humboldt called the generation and re-generation of a language, that the OED both documents and encourages.
Notes
1. Coleridge and Humboldt met once: in Rome, in 1806. They had a conversation about English literature. Coleridge describes this meeting in Friend, 1: 510n (qtd. in McKusick, Coleridge’s Philosophy 157n37).
3. Some indisputably successful words that Coleridge wrote down, if not first, at least very early in their careers: bisexual, bi-polar, busyness, fatalistic, egoistic, psycho-analytical, relativity, subconsciousness, appraisal, artifact, heuristic, subjectivity, factual, technique, totalize, soulmate, housemate, historicism, fore-grounded, atomistic, belletristic, cyclical, realism, the sense of reality, romanticize, marginalia, protozoa, greenery, immanence (McKusick, “‘Living Words’” 26–45).
4. This basic sense of “the exemplary” I owe to a paper given by the philosopher William Day at the conference on Stanley Cavell and Literary Criticism held May 2008, in Edinburgh.
5. See 51–55 of The Philosophy of Rhetoric for Richard’s critique of “the Usage Doctrine.”

References