**On the ‘affinities of Oriental languages’:
Wilhelm von Humboldt and his British connections**

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Abstract

In 1828 the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland published in its *Transactions* an extensive letter by Wilhelm von Humboldt on “ascertaining the affinities” between the languages of India and Ceylon. In his letter Humboldt warns against the use of lexical comparison as the absolute proof for linguistic relationship, and he expounds his own criterion of analogy in grammatical form. Humboldt’s text is analyzed here from the point of view of its methodological relevance, as well as for its historiographical interest, linking it to the tradition of missionary and colonial linguistics, and the information it sheds on the complex network of scholarly exchanges concerning languages spoken outside Europe.

Key words: comparative grammar; language affinities; lexical comparison; Humboldt, Wilhelm von; Johnston, Alexander

1. Introduction

This contribution borders on the history of missionary and colonial linguistics, and their reception by (European) scholars interested in ‘exotic’ languages and cultures. As well-known, there is no strict dividing line between missionary linguistics (increasingly documented in the proceedings of the Missionary Linguistics conferences)² and colonial linguistics, given the comprehensiveness of the concept of ‘colonizing’ (other peoples and cultures), and in view of the historical interaction of missionaries and laymen in the process of documenting exotic languages.³ The impact of missionary and colonial linguistics was twofold: on the one hand, it had a ‘synchronic’ or immediate effect, relevant to a community of scholars and administrators (and, in some cases also, of immediate relevance to the local culture concerned); on the other hand, these activities, and more particularly, their textual residues, had a repercussion on later generations of scholars interested in the languages dealt with.

¹ This paper was written in the frame of a research project on missionary linguistics entitled “Evolving views on the world’s languages in a globalising world (1540–1840): information growth, conceptual shifts, scholarly networks in the circulation of linguistic knowledge” (University of Leuven Research Council Project, 3H150301).

² For an overview, see Zwartjes (2012); for an in-depth study of the ‘Portuguese tradition’ of missionary linguistics, see Zwartjes (2011).

³ Cf. the observations of Xavier & Županov (2015) and Van Hal (2016).

We will focus here on aspects of the scholarly reception of these activities, on the basis of a case study centered around the German all-round scholar and political figure Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and (part of) his network. As we learn from his biography (e.g., Sweet 1980), Humboldt’s interest in the study of exotic languages received a strong impetus during his stay in Rome, where he acquainted himself with Lorenzo Hervás y Panduro (1735–1809), but it was only after his retirement from political life that he devoted all of his leisure-time to the study of language. For his ambitious plan of a comparative study of the spirit and structure of languages worldwide, he set up a wide-ranging network of correspondents, including fellow scholars, as well as diplomats, civil servants, travelers, traders, and missionaries (cf. Swiggers 1995 on Humboldt’s European-American network; and, more generally, Reutter 2011). His untiring efforts led to the constitution of an impressive collection of books, manuscripts, notes and letters containing linguistic information.⁴

The scope of this contribution is restricted in two ways: first, the geographical area dealt with is the Indian subcontinent; next, the focus will be on Humboldt’s comparative interest in the ‘affinities’ of what in his contacts with British scholars he called the ‘affinities’ among the ‘Oriental languages’. For this type of study Humboldt seems to have privileged information provided by British civil servants. On the other hand, for his ‘immanent’ study of the grammatical structure of languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and Marathi, he used descriptions produced by missionaries.⁵ Also, in gathering materials on American Indian languages, and on languages in the Southern Pacific (cf. Folie, Heeschen & Zimmer eds. 2017), Humboldt appealed to missionary work.

The starting point for our study is a letter written in the form of an ‘essay’ (or memoir) by the German all-round scholar and political figure Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). The *Essay*-letter (Humboldt 1828),⁶ written in the Spring of 1828, was addressed to Sir Alexander

⁴ For a description of Humboldt’s “*Arbeitsbibliothek*”, as constituted between 1821 and 1827, see Mueller-Vollmer (1993: 407–444).

⁵ For Tamil, Humboldt used a manuscript version of the Jesuit Costantino Giuseppe Beschi’s *Clavis Humaniorum Litterarum Sublimioris Tamulice Idiomatis* (cf. Mueller-Vollmer 1993: 100, 287), but not the printed *Grammatica Latino-Tamulica* [Tranquebar 1728; cf. Zwartjes 2011: 306]. For Marathi, he availed himself of several missionary works: William Carey’s *Grammar of the Mahratta Language* [Serampore 1805] and *Dictionary of the Mahratta Language* [Serampore 1810], and the anonymous *Grammatica marastta*, published in Portuguese by the Propaganda Fide in 1778, and reedited in Lisbon in 1805 (for an analysis of this work, see Zwartjes 2011: 67–75). For Hindi, he used the 1805 Lisbon edition of the *Grammatica indostana*, an anonymous missionary grammar written in Portuguese and first published in 1778 by the Propaganda Fide (for an analysis of this work, see Zwartjes 2011: 75–89). It seems that although Humboldt owned several of William Carey’s works on languages of India, he never engaged in correspondence with this Baptist missionary (1761–1834) and founder of Serampore university. It should also be noted that in order to obtain detailed information on the Malagasy language Humboldt corresponded with a missionary in Antananarivo, Madagascar, viz. Joseph J. Freeman (cf. Mueller-Vollmer 1993: 59, 343–345).

⁶ The text was published at the end of 1828, and copies of the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society* had already been distributed when Humboldt noticed a disturbing typographical error in a Sanskrit word cited on p. 217, line

Johnston (1775–1849), former third Chief Justice of Ceylon and second Advocate Fiscal of Ceylon, who in 1823 was one of the founders of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. The Royal Asiatic Society (cf. Beckingham 1979) promoted research on the history, archaeology, religion, culture and languages of Asia (including parts of northern Africa); it was a meeting place of scholars and administrators of the British overseas possessions. Alexander Johnston, who had received his education as a youth in India, and who mastered various Indian languages (Tamil, Telugu, Hindi), had studied in Europe, before returning to India, where he held several important official functions (cf. Reutter 2011: 279). Upon his retirement in 1819 he returned to England.

The direct occasion for Humboldt's letter to Johnston was a circumstance typical of intellectual networks in the Modern Period: Johnston had put at Humboldt's disposal⁷ a memoir by Sir James Mackintosh (1765–1832), a Scottish lawyer, who had been Chief Judge in Bombay, between 1804 and 1811, where he had established the *Literary Society of Bombay* (which eventually became the *Asiatic Society of Mumbai*). Upon his return to England, Mackintosh combined a political career with literary and educational pursuits. He was for some time professor in the East India Company's College at Haileybury, where future administrators of the Company received a thorough training, including economy, history, law, and mathematics, and were introduced to a wide range of languages (Sanskrit, Urdu, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Farsi).⁸ James Mackintosh dedicated much of his time to writing historical and philosophical works: *Dissertation on the Progress of Ethical Philosophy* (1830), *The Life of Sir Thomas More* (1830), a huge three-volume *History of England (1830–1832)*, and *History of the Revolution in England in 1688* (posthumously published in 1834; the work opens with a "Notice of the Life, Writings and Speeches of Sir James Mackintosh"). As is clear from the opening lines of Humboldt's letter to Johnston, the memoir that had been

20. Through the intermediary of Friedrich August Rosen (1805–1837), the error was corrected through a reprint of the page in the separate editions of the essay; in volume II of the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society*, the error was corrected in a list of 'Errata' on p. xii, where one reads: "This mistake was not discovered till some of the copies of the Transactions had been distributed; in those which still remained unpublished it was, at Baron Humboldt's request, corrected in a reprint of the page"; this is followed by the quotation of the relevant passage in Humboldt's original French manuscript. See also *infra*, notes 15 and 41. Although available in a printed form, Humboldt's 1828 *Essay* has received only scant attention from historians of linguistics; cf. Di Cesare (1990: 164). References to Humboldt's *Essay* will be to the page numbering of the text as published in the *Transactions*; we have also used the copy of the separate publication of the *Essay* that is kept in the Library of the *American Philosophical Society*.

⁷ Previously, Johnston had sent a Malagasy translation of the Ten Commandments to Humboldt; see his letter of October 15, 1827 (conserved in Cracow, Jagielloński Library, Coll. ling. fol. 53, Bl. 144–145; cf. Mueller-Vollmer 1993: 221); in another letter, of August 17, 1827 (see *infra*, note 10) Johnston had informed Humboldt about linguistic works produced and/or kept by the *London Missionary Society*.

⁸ On Haileybury College, see Maheshwari (2002: 202–218).

communicated to Humboldt was one of a specifically linguistic interest, and not a very recent one.

SIR:

I have the honour to return you Sir James Mackintosh's interesting memoir. It possesses (like every thing which comes from the pen of that gifted and ingenious writer) the highest interest; and the ideas which are so luminously developed in it have the more merit, if we consider, that, at the period when this memoir was published, philosophical notions on the study and nature of languages were rarer and more novel than they are at present. (Humboldt 1828: 213)

We are on safe grounds, then, to assume that the memoir in question was Mackintosh's *Plan of a Comparative Vocabulary of Indian Languages*, dated to 1806.⁹ This is, in fact, confirmed by a passage in Humboldt's *Essay*, where the date "1806" is mentioned:

In the present state of our knowledge of the languages of India, which is very different from that of 1806, and possessing, as we now do, grammars and dictionaries of most of these idioms, I should not advise our confining ourselves to a plan which can only give a very imperfect idea of each of them. We can, and ought, to go farther at the present day. (Humboldt 1828: 214)

As the first lines of his letter also make clear, Humboldt's *Essay*-letter to Johnston¹⁰ was not meant as a simple act of courtesy: his initial word of thanks is followed by a long exposition of Humboldt's ideas – rooted in "philosophical notions on the study and nature of languages" – concerning research on Oriental languages. Humboldt addressed himself, through Johnston, to the *Royal Asiatic Society*, which he urged to continue, and stimulate, the study of the "different Indian dialects."¹¹

I would, in the first place, observe, that the Royal Asiatic Society could not direct its efforts to a point more important, and more intimately connected with the national glory, than that of endeavouring to throw further light on the relations which subsist among the different Indian dialects. (Humboldt 1828: 213)

⁹ James Mackintosh read his text in Bombay on May 26, 1806; it was published in 1806 by the *Literary Society of Bombay*. There was a 1808 Calcutta reprint of the text. Both editions were catalogued in the description of William Marsden's [1754–1836] library (Marsden 1827: 77). The larger part of Marsden's book collection is deposited at King's College (University of London). In 1819 Mackintosh's *Plan* was "republished" in the *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*, without being updated. It is not clear to which edition of the text Humboldt had access.

¹⁰ Humboldt and Johnston exchanged letters in the years 1827–1831. In a letter to Humboldt of August 17, 1827, Alexander Johnston welcomes Humboldt's project of a stay in England in the Spring of the following year (letter conserved in Cracow, Jagielloński Library, Coll. ling. fol. 56, Bl. 120-121, 122-125; cf. Mueller-Vollmer 1993: 233, 235); on October 15, 1827 Johnston provided Humboldt with Malagasy materials [cf. *supra* note 7]; in a letter of August 28, 1828 (letter conserved in Berlin, Archiv Schloss Tegel, Inv. Nr. 1055, Bl. 39-40; cf. Mattson 1980: nr. 12066) Johnston mentions that Humboldt's *Essay*-letter read to the *Royal Asiatic Society* had met with an enthusiastic reception.

¹¹ Humboldt was already very familiar with the Sanskrit language, of which he possessed several grammars, dictionaries, and text editions (by Franz Bopp, August-Wilhelm Schlegel, Charles Wilkins, Horace Wilson, Henry P. Forster, William Carey), and probably also with Bengali (he owned Graves Champney Haughton's *Rudiments of Bengali Grammar* [London 1821] and *Bengali Selections* [London 1822]).

As a matter of fact, Humboldt's "ideas" on the topic – which Johnston had asked him to formulate¹² – took the form of a short treatise, which the *Royal Asiatic Society* then published in the second volume of its *Transactions* under the title "An Essay on the Best Means of ascertaining the Affinities of Oriental Languages, by Baron William Humboldt, For. M.R.A.S. Contained in a Letter addressed to Sir Alexander Johnston, Knt., V.P.R.A.S."; the text, translated by Benjamin Guy Babington (cf. *infra*, section 3), was read before the *Royal Asiatic Society* on June 14, 1828. The text was also separately published as an offprint, and was sent out by Humboldt to scholars in Europe and the United States.¹³

Humboldt's ideas doubtlessly made a deep impression on the members of the Royal Asiatic Society, as can be gathered not only from a personal testimony by Johnston (letter to Humboldt of August 28, 1828; see note 6) and by the fact that it was published in their *Transactions* but also from the fact that one of the leading figures of the Society, the outstanding Sanskrit scholar Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837),¹⁴ edited the text and appended a note to it, informing the readership of a language-comparative initiative taken by him.¹⁵

¹² See the conclusion of the letter: "These, Sir, are my ideas upon the subject upon which you wished to have my opinion. It is only in compliance with your request, that I have ventured to lay them before you; for I am well aware how much better able the distinguished members of the Royal Asiatic Society are to form a judgment of, and give an opinion upon, this matter than I am." (Humboldt 1828: 221) See also the following passage in the letter: "This is more particularly the point to which I wish to direct your attention, since you have been pleased to ask my opinion respecting the methods proposed by Sir James Mackintosh." (Humboldt 1828: 214) In a letter to Christian Lassen (letter of January 26, 1829; see *infra*, note 13), Humboldt mentions the fact that he was asked to give his opinion on the *Plan* of Mackintosh. It seems that Humboldt seized the occasion to outline his ideas on how language comparison had to be undertaken, and to affirm his status as a linguistic scholar (cf. Reutter 2011: 279–280). On Humboldt's own admission (in his letter to Lassen of January 26, 1829), he profited from the opportunity to expound his ideas (cf. *infra*, note 44).

¹³ See Humboldt's letter to Christian Lassen (January 26, 1829): "Ich werde ihn *sous bande* abgehen lassen, und er dürfte also wohl erst nach diesen Zeilen bei Ihnen eintreffen." The letter is kept in the University Library of Bonn (Nachlass Lassen S 860); cf. Mattson (1980: nr. 7975). It seems that Humboldt had received copies of the separate publication of his *Essay* in January 1829, and immediately started sending them off to scholars belonging to his intellectual network.

¹⁴ Henry Thomas Colebrooke was the son of Sir George Colebrooke (1729–1809), who had been chairman of the East India Company.

¹⁵ In the printing process of the *Essay*, mistakes were introduced by the printer. In his letter to Humboldt of January 9, 1829, Friedrich August Rosen informs his German correspondent that the errors will be corrected in the then not yet distributed copies. In his answer to Rosen (letter of January 25, 1829; cf. Mattson 1980: nr. 12114), Humboldt writes: "Die Aufklärungen, die Sie mir über die Druckfehler gegeben, haben mich sehr gefreut. Meine Handschrift ist also unschuldig befunden. Ein Secretair, wie Babington, sollte aber, auch in Sprachen, die er nicht weiß, sorgfältiger seyn. Von Colebrooke sage ich nichts. Seine Correctur ist natürlich nur eine Formalität. Wie wird sich der alte verdriessliche Mann die Mühe geben, etwas wirklich nachzusehen? Ich danke sehr für die Besorgung des Cartons, und bitte Sie darauf zu halten, dass Huttman im Druckfehlerverzeichnis meine Unschuld documentirt. Der Druckfehler ist darum so unangenehm, weil es gar nicht die Art des Setzers ist, für tönende Buchstaben dumpfe zu nehmen"; Humboldt requested that the correct original passage (in his original French manuscript, which was translated into English) be cited as a proof of his not being responsible for the errors. William Huttman was, until 1832, the Secretary of the *Royal Asiatic Society*. On January 30, 1829, Rosen informed Johnston about the corrections having been made. In his letter to Humboldt of the same day (letter conserved in Berlin, Archiv Schloss Tegel Inv. Nr. 1056, Bl. 41/43; cf. Mattson 1980: nr. 12122) Johnston informed his German correspondent that the corrections had been made.

The work to which allusion is made by Baron William de Humboldt, in the passage where I am named, was undertaken by me in furtherance of the views developed by Sir James Mackintosh. I thought that a more copious comparative vocabulary than he had proposed, would be practically useful; and would be instructive in more points of view than he had contemplated. Accordingly, at my instance, a Sanscrit vocabulary and a Persian one were printed with blank half pages, and distributed among gentlemen, whose situations were considered to afford the opportunity of having the blank column filled up, by competent persons, with a vocabulary of a provincial language. Vocabularies of the same vernacular tongue by a Pandit and a Munshi, would serve to correct mutually, and complete the information sought from them. Very few answers, however, were received: indeed scarcely any, except from Dr. Buchanan Hamilton.¹⁶ The compilation, to which Baron de Humboldt refers, comprises as many as I succeeded in collecting. (Colebrooke in Humboldt 1828: 221)

Humboldt sent copies of his *Essay*¹⁷ to leading linguistic scholars, such as Jacob Grimm (1785–1863),¹⁸ Peter Stephen Duponceau (1760–1844),¹⁹ and Christian Lassen (1800–1876),²⁰ with another copy to be passed on to August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767–1845).

2. The scholarly exploitation of missionary linguistics: Humboldt's pursuit

Humboldt's grand plan for investigating the "affinities" of "Oriental" languages – focusing on India, but extending to the Indian archipelago – was closely connected with work accomplished by missionaries and colonial civil servants, and especially with materials that were in the hands of British scholars. In this way, Humboldt's own intellectual network was to intersect with a "textual" network rooted in missionary and colonizing endeavors. Before we look into this, it is, however, worthwhile to take a look at the contents of Humboldt's program, in view of its methodological relevance.

¹⁶ See Keller (2015) for a history of the practice of circulating such lists among scholars.

¹⁷ The *Essay* was very favourably reviewed, anonymously, in the *Asiatic Journal* (1829: 325-326).

¹⁸ In a letter to Jacob Grimm, dated November 12, 1828, Humboldt promises to send him as soon as possible a copy of the separate publication of the *Essay*: "Ich habe die Gelegenheit gehabt, über dies Beurtheilen der Verwandtschaft von Sprachen aus blossen, nach Wörterbüchern gemachten Wortverzeichnissen, etwas in England zu schreiben, das die *Asiatische Gesellschaft* hat drucken lassen. Ich hoffe, *Exemplare* zu bekommen, u. theile alsdann gewiß sogleich eines Ew. Wohlgebornen mit." The original of the letter is kept in Berlin (SBBPK, Nachlass Grimm 1165 (4)); cf. Mattson (1980: nr. 7938).

¹⁹ In a letter of November 13, 1828 to Peter Stephen Duponceau Humboldt informs him about his stay in London, and about his *Essay* in the *Transactions*, of which he announces to have a copy sent to the *American Philosophical Society*: "Pendant mon séjour à *Londres* j'ai été consulté sur les travaux que la Société Asiatique paroit entreprendre par la connoissance plus approfondie des langues de l'Inde. On avoit le projet de recueillir des vocabulaires. J'ai déconseillé de se borner à cette méthode extrêmement imparfaite, et j'ai exposé mes principes sur l'affinité des langues et les recherches qui peuvent la découvrir. J'ai avancé que c'est l'identité des idiômes. J'ai adressé là-dessus une lettre à *Sir Alexandre Johnston* qui a été lue à la *Société* et imprimée par elle. Je n'en ai pas encore reçus d'exemplaires, mais je tâcherai de Vous en faire parvenir de *Londres*." The letter is conserved in Philadelphia (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Etting Papers, Scientists, fol. 44); cf. Mattson (1980: nr. 7939).

²⁰ See the reference to the letter, *supra*, in note 12. Humboldt enclosed a second copy for August-Wilhelm Schlegel, Lassen's colleague in Bonn: "Ich bitte Ew. Wohlgebornen das zweite Exemplar des Aufsatzes unsrem Freunde Schlegel mit meinen herzlichsten und freundschaftlichsten Empfehlungen zu übergeben."

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Humboldt's interest in the comparison of languages – or language varieties, since Humboldt does not make a methodologically, nor empirically grounded distinction between languages and dialects²¹ – was basically a “genetic” one: comparison was used as a means of “ascertaining affinities”, i.e. establishing genetic ties, and, when possible, of combining the genetic connection with a historical and geographical²² starting point.

A comparative analysis of languages aiming at such goals should, in Humboldt's view, proceed according to a sound method and, in direct relation to this method, from an adequate understanding of comparison-based demonstration (both aspects constitute the core matter of what today we call “the comparative method”). On both points Humboldt departed from the program outlined in the *Plan* of James Mackintosh.²³

Mackintosh had proposed to collect word lists for the various languages of India, proceeding from what today we would call an “onomasiological” point of view, i.e. eliciting answers to a lexically framed questionnaire inquiring into the native expression(s) corresponding to a notion or concept named by its English term. While admitting that this type of investigation could yield interesting information,²⁴ Humboldt points to two major defects: (a) such investigations only provide information on the (loosely examined) vocabulary of languages (and are therefore insufficient as a methodologically sound proof for ascertaining ‘affinity’, i.e. genetic relationship);²⁵ (b) such investigations are not based on a “profound” knowledge of the languages investigated, i.e. they are not based on a thorough insight into the structure²⁶ of the languages.

²¹ See, e.g., his fluctuating usage in his *Essay*: “the relations which subsist among the different Indian dialects”; “more complete information regarding the languages of India”; “the different languages which we wish to compare”; “the particular differences of dialects”; “this manner of considering the difference of languages”; “upon all the dialects of India”. However, it is clear that Humboldt did not consider the two terms to be synonymous. On the one hand, in connection with (a general notion of) “affinity”, he uses *language*, whereas *dialect* seems to be favoured when it comes to identifying lower-level (or “particular”) differences. On the other hand, there is at least one passage (echoing a traditional formulation; cf. Van Hal & Van Rooy 2017) in which Humboldt views dialects as varieties that show only minor differences: “It is equally curious to determine whether the primitive languages of India are to be traced over the Indian archipelago in dialects differing little from each other, and whether we are to assign their origin to these islands or to the continent.”

²² See the formulation in the passage quoted in the preceding footnote: “whether we are to assign their origin to these islands or to the continent.”

²³ Humboldt speaks of *the methods* (in the plural) of Mackintosh: “This is more particularly the point to which I wish to direct your attention, since you have been pleased to ask my opinion respecting the methods proposed by Sir James Mackintosh.” (Humboldt 1828: 214)

²⁴ See his statement: “It would assuredly have been very desirable to execute his plan, at the period when it was formed; we should then by this time have had more complete information regarding the languages of India; and should perhaps have been in the possession of dialects, of the existence of which we are now ignorant.” (Humboldt 1828: 214)

²⁵ Rocher & Rocher (2012: 73) recognize that Humboldt's criticisms of Mackintosh's *Plan* and Colebrooke's collection were justified from the methodological point of view, but they note that Humboldt failed to “address the practical utility that was one of Colebrooke's guiding concerns as a colonial administrator.”

²⁶ Cf. *infra*, note 28.

I confess that I am extremely averse to the system which proceeds on the supposition that we can judge of the affinity of languages merely by a certain number of ideas expressed in the different languages which we wish to compare. (Humboldt 1828: 214);²⁷

If we would make ourselves acquainted with the relation which subsists between two languages, we ought to possess a thorough and profound knowledge of each of them. This is a principle dictated alike by common sense and by that precision acquired by the habit of scientific research. (Humboldt 1828: 214-215)

Now, it is true – and Humboldt does not omit to mention it – that Mackintosh had been aware of the dangers of random lexical comparison as a demonstrative technique, but the restrictive requirement he imposed on it was also deemed insufficient by Humboldt:

Sir James Mackintosh very justly observes, that the affinity of two languages is much better proved when whole families of words resemble each other, than when this is the case with single words only. But how shall we recognize families of words in foreign languages, if we only select from them two or three hundred isolated terms? (Humboldt 1828: 215)

It is precisely to this essential point of demonstrative validity that Humboldt turns his attention: the cross-linguistic comparison of (large numbers of) words can only yield certain results – for language-genetic investigations – if we gain insights into the “analogy of meanings and forms of combination.” What Humboldt understands by this ‘*analogy*’, can be captured by our modern concept of “correspondence in grammatical structure” (see also Di Cesare 1990: 164-165). Humboldt expatiates on this in a more elaborate fashion, resorting to terms²⁸ such as “roots”, “grammatical affixes”, and “methods by which each language forms its derivatives” — the latter formulation in fact subsumes both derivation strictly speaking and (the structural principles of) word formation. Let us quote his circumstantial formulation:

There undoubtedly subsists among words of the same language an analogy of meanings and forms of combination easy to be perceived. It is from this analogy, considered in its whole extent, and compared with the analogy of the words of another language, that we discover the affinity of two idioms, as far as it is recognizable in their vocabularies. It is in this manner alone, that we recognize the roots and the methods by which each language forms its derivatives. The comparison of two languages requires, that we should examine whether, and in what degree, the roots and derivative terms are common to both. It is not, then, by terms expressive of general ideas; such as sun, moon, man, woman, &c., that we must commence the comparison of two languages, but by their entire dictionary critically explained. The simple comparison of a certain number of words, by reducing the examination of languages too much to a mere mechanical labour, often leads us to omit examining sufficiently the words which form the subjects of our comparison; and to avoid this defect, we are forced to enter deeply into all the minutiae of grammar, separating the words from

²⁷ See also another passage in the *Essay*, where Humboldt criticizes the procedure of “taking from the language which we wish to examine isolated words, selected, not according to their affinities and natural etymology, but according to the ideas which they express.” (Humboldt 1828: 215)

²⁸ In one instance he also uses *structure*: “What I have remarked proves, as I think, that even if we confine ourselves to the comparison of a certain number of words in different languages, it is still necessary to enter more deeply into their structure, and to apply ourselves to the study of their grammar.” (Humboldt 1828: 216)

their grammatical affixes, and comparing only what is really essential to the expression of the idea which they represent. (Humboldt 1828: 215-216)

Clearly, Humboldt advocated a grammar-focused comparison of languages in order to ascertain possible genetic relationships. This methodological principle was grounded in a fundamental theoretical tenet, extensively argued by Humboldt (especially in his posthumously published *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, Humboldt 1836), and subsequently also endorsed by Neo-Humboldtian linguistics and its sequels, such as Boasian anthropological linguistics, viz. that the grammar of a language is inherent to the world view of a 'nation', and is therefore also much less liable to change. The theoretical tenet is also stated in the *Essay*:

Languages are the true images of the modes in which nations think and combine their ideas. The manner of this combination represented by the grammar, is altogether as essential and characteristic as are the sounds applied to objects, that is to say, the words. The form of language being quite inherent in the intellectual faculties of nations, it is very natural that one generation should transmit theirs to that which follows it; while words, being simple signs of ideas, may be adopted by races altogether distinct. (Humboldt 1828: 216)

But, as we know from Humboldt's correspondence with August-Wilhelm Schlegel (cf. Leitzmann 1908 for the edition of the letters, and Hoenigswald 1984 for a study of the main methodological insights contained in the letter partially edited in Appendix A), the German language scholar was well aware that grammatical comparison should go beyond structural similarities. Foreshadowing explicit formulations (as we find, e.g., in Antoine Meillet's *La méthode comparative en linguistique historique* [1925]; cf. Swiggers 2012) of the requirement of correspondence in both structural configuration and phonic substance, Humboldt noted that his principle should not be taken "in the abstract but in the concrete;" put in other words, the grammatical forms²⁹ should be examined and compared both as to their systemic functioning and as to their sound shape. This is how Humboldt formulates³⁰ this constraint:

If I attach great importance, however, under this view, to the grammar of a language, I do not refer to the system of grammar in general, but to grammatical forms, considered with respect to their system and their sounds taken conjointly. (Humboldt 1828: 216);

If I assert that, in order to prove the affinity of languages, we should pay attention to the employment of grammatical forms and to their sounds taken together, it is because I would affirm that they must be considered not only in the abstract but in the concrete. (Humboldt 1828: 217)

²⁹ On Humboldt's concept of 'grammatical form', see Swiggers (1985).

³⁰ Compare also Humboldt's statement that "the expression *grammar* [should] be not taken vaguely, but with a due regard to the sounds of grammatical forms." (Humboldt 1828: 218)

Humboldt exemplifies this combined criterion in two ways: (a) from a ‘confirmation’ point of view, by showing that a comparison of Sanskrit infinitives and Latin supines, or of the Sanskrit, Greek, Gothic and Lithuanian verb forms meaning “I know”, offers a convincing demonstration of the genetic relationship of these languages; (b) from a “deficiency’ point of view, by showing that a mere structural correspondence (such as the presence in some languages of first person plural forms inclusive and exclusive) cannot be a proof of genetic affinity, in the absence of a phonic correspondence.

It is precisely grammatical-phonological correspondence (or: correspondence sets) that constitutes the diagnostic criterion of genetic relationship. Admittedly, grammatical systems undergo changes, and James Mackintosh had precisely invoked the changes in grammar as an argument against using grammatical comparison. But as Humboldt admonishes, one should not be blinded by this (superficial) phenomenon of “historical revolutions”; it is of the utmost important to look in depth at grammatical forms.

Out of these changes it has arisen, that languages of the same family have a different grammatical system, and that languages really distinct resemble each other in some degree. But the slightest examination will suffice to shew the real relations which subsist between those languages, especially if by following the plan above laid down we proceed to the examination of forms which are alike identical in their uses and in their sounds. It is thus that we discover without difficulty that the English language is of Germanic origin, and that the Persian belongs to the Sanscrit³¹ family of languages, notwithstanding the very great difference which exists between the grammars of these idioms. (Humboldt 1828: 219)

Here, Humboldt’s argumentation makes full circle. It is grammatical-phonological correspondence that provides proof of *affinity*, or *genetic relationship*, i.e. relationship in origin and filiation. This is very distinct, in Humboldt’s terminology, from *historical* relationship, i.e. a relation that has occurred in time, and which may be a distant one and also a very temporary one. In contradistinction with grammatical correspondences, lexical correspondences may be useful to detect such historical relationships, but when used for deeper-reaching conclusions, such facts should always be examined critically, since it may be that we deal with borrowings (see also Brown 1967: 107-108).

It is generally believed, that the affinity of two languages is undeniably proved, if words that are applied to objects which must have been known to the natives ever since their existence, exhibit a great degree of resemblance, and to a certain extent this is correct. But, notwithstanding this, such a method of judging of the affinity of languages seems to me by no means infallible. It often happens, that even the objects of our earliest perceptions, or of the first necessity, are represented by words taken from foreign languages, and which belong to a different class. If we only examine the list furnished by Sir James Mackintosh, we shall find there such words as *people, countenance, touch, voice, labour, force, power, marriage, spirit, circle, tempest, autumn, time, mountain, valley, air, vapour, herb, verdure*, and others of the same kind. Now all

³¹ Humboldt proposed the designation “Sanskrit(ic) [family of] languages” instead of the term “Indo-Germanic.”

these words being evidently derived from the Latin, as it was transformed after the fall of the Roman empire, we ought, judging from these words, rather to assign to the English an origin similar to that of the Roman languages than to that of the German. (Humboldt 1828: 219)

3. *Behind the ideas: linguistic documentation*

Humboldt's *Essay* contains insightful ideas, which shed light on the author's intellectual development as well as on the theoretical embedding of comparative grammar as it was conceived in the first decades of the 19th century. Another interesting facet of the text is the information it provides on the relationship between the empirical linguistic documentation provided by missionaries and civil servants and the exploitation of this information by linguistic scholars.³² As we have seen, Humboldt's *Essay* was the outcome of his critical and penetrating reading of a programmatic text written by James Mackintosh at a time when the latter was a judge in Bombay. Also, Alexander Johnston was by profession a juridical scholar, albeit with a profound interest in language. Interestingly, Johnston provided Humboldt not only with the memoir of Mackintosh, he also communicated to his German correspondent a paper by Francis Whyte Ellis (1777–1819) on the Malayalam language.³³ On Ellis, a civil servant of the East India Company in Madras, we find some information in R. Caldwell's *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages* (1856), where he is mentioned for having contributed a short comparative word list of Dravidian languages to Campbell's grammar of Telugu: "The first to break ground in the field was Mr. Ellis, a Madras Civilian, who was profoundly versed in the Tamil language and literature, and whose interesting but very brief comparison, not of the grammatical forms, but only of some of the vocables of three Dravidian dialects, is contained in his Introduction to *Campbell's Telugu Grammar*." Alexander Duncan Campbell, mentioned by Caldwell, was also a civil servant of the East India Company at Madras; he published *A Grammar of the Teloogoo Language* in 1818 (second edition: 1820).

³² The significance of this scholarly network is also made explicit by Mueller-Vollmer & Heeschen (2007: 436–437).

³³ See Humboldt's letter: "Mr. Ellis's paper on the Malayalam language with which you were so good as to furnish me, contains assertions on the affinity of the Tamul language to the idioms of Java, which it would be very important to verify." (Humboldt 1828: 213) In his letter to Babington of June 29, 1828 (see Appendix B), Humboldt urges the *Royal Asiatic Society* to "reprint it immediately now and make common to the learned men of Europe the information which it contains." In a letter (undated, but to be dated in the period of Humboldt's stay in London), Richard Clarke informed Humboldt on Ellis's publications and (unfinished) projects: "Ellis intended to put forth a series of essays, of which the project was to show the affinity of the dialects of S. India, but the fates cut his thread too soon. One on the Telugu is prefixed to Campbell's Grammar. One on Malayalma was printed by itself, & I think one on Carnataca. But of this I am not certain. The essay on Tamil, alas! Was never composed. They were printed at the College Press, of which he had the control & superintendence but were not published, nor were they executed under any special sanction of Government" (Cracow, Jagielloński Library (Coll. ling. fol. 56, Bl. 51-52), cf. Mueller-Vollmer (1993: 232, 235).

From Humboldt's letter it also appears that he had assembled a rather considerable amount of information on the languages of India. In the first place, he mentions having seen in the library of the East India Company³⁴ a manuscript³⁵ containing a collection of Sanskrit words. In addition, he refers to a dictionary of Telugu by Campbell³⁶. Humboldt's letter equally informs us that he was aware of the work of other European scholars interested in the "affinity" of the Indian languages: he makes mention of "a series of papers" published by Eugène Burnouf in the *Journal Asiatique*.³⁷

In Humboldt's view much could be expected from comparative linguistic work conducted under the auspices of learned societies,³⁸ and in the case of the languages of India his hope rested on a society such as the *Royal Asiatic Society*.

In England, also, the great advantage is possessed of being able to direct works upon these languages to be undertaken in India itself, and to guide such labours by plans sent from this country. In India these are living languages, and literary men of the very nations in which they are spoken may be employed in the researches we wish to forward. No other nation possesses so valuable an advantage. It is important to profit by it. (Humboldt 1828: 220)

A precious piece of information contained in Humboldt's letter is his mention of a "vast quantity of manuscript materials" concerning the languages of India. In this connection he mentions a "Dr. B. Babington," to be identified with Benjamin Guy Babington (1794–1866), a member of the well-known Babington family, which produced politicians, scientists, historians, poets, and scholars. Benjamin Babington, who had studied at the East India Company College at Haileybury, had been active in Madras;³⁹ although he subsequently embarked on a medical

³⁴ Humboldt had been informed of the rich holdings of the East India Company by Julius Heinrich Klaproth in a letter of May 8, 1824 (Harnack 1896: 66-67; cf. Mattson 1980: nr. 11799).

³⁵ According to Colebrooke's note appended to Humboldt's letter (see *supra*, section 1), the author of the manuscript would be "Buchanan Hamilton," i.e. Francis Buchanan (later: Francis Hamilton). Buchanan (1762–1829), a physician and naturalist of Scottish descent, is a well-known botanical scholar, who travelled throughout Asia, and who conducted surveys of South India. After having surveyed, between 1807 and 1814, the areas under the jurisdiction of the East India Company, he returned in 1815 to England.

³⁶ The work referred to is: Archibald Campbell, *Dictionary of the telooogo or gentoo language* [Madras 1821].

³⁷ Humboldt was probably thinking here of Burnouf's review of Bopp's *Vergleichende Zergliederung des Sanskrits und der mit ihm verwandten Sprachen* (*Journal Asiatique* 6, 1825, 52-62 and 113-117), and his "Mémoire sur quelques noms de l'île de Ceylan, et particulièrement sur celui de Taprobane, sous lequel elle était connue des anciens" (*Journal Asiatique* 9, 1826, 129-149).

³⁸ "In an enterprize so vast as that of examining to the utmost possible extent each of the numerous languages of India, progress can only be made insensibly and step by step. But learned societies afford this advantage, that the same labour can be continued through a long series of years; and complete and perfect works upon two or three idioms are certainly preferable to notions, more or less superficial, upon all the dialects of India, hastily put forth for the purpose of coming at once to a general conclusion." (Humboldt 1828: 220-221)

³⁹ Babington is the author of an English translation [Madras 1822] of Beschi's manuscript grammar of Tamil (cf. *supra*, note 5); however, this "translation" (published under the title *A Grammar of the High Dialect of the Tamil Language, termed Shen-Tamil*. By C.J. Beschi. Translated from the original Latin, by Benj. Guy Babington) is considerably different in arrangement from the original.

career, he kept an interest in the study of language, as can be gathered from the fact that he served as secretary to the *Royal Asiatic Society*. According to Humboldt, Babington had in his possession “alphabets altogether unknown in Europe up to the present time” (Humboldt 1828: 220).⁴⁰ In a letter sent to August Wilhelm von Schlegel (letter of June 16, 1829),⁴¹ Humboldt mentions that it was Babington who had translated Humboldt’s original French text into English. In addition, Babington assisted Humboldt in expanding his scholarly network towards scholars active in India:

Thus Dr. Babington has mentioned Mr. Whish to me, as being profoundly acquainted with the Malayalam, and as being already employed in making it better known in Europe. (Humboldt 1828: 220)

The scholar referred to here was Charles Matthew Whish (1794–1833), also a civil servant of the East India Company in Madras, who eventually became criminal judge at Cuddapah. Whish, one of the first students of Indian mathematical science, was a collector of manuscripts⁴² in Sanskrit and other languages of India, and he had been collecting materials for a grammar and dictionary of Malayalam. In a letter to Babington of June 29, 1828 (see Appendix B), Humboldt expressed his hope that Babington “would introduce him at his request to Mr. Wish [*sic*].”⁴³ We do not know whether Humboldt indeed established contact with Whish, who died prematurely in India.

4. From colonial and missionary linguistics to scholarly networks: the relevance of Humboldt’s Essay

In conclusion, we first want to point out the *intrinsic* interest of Humboldt’s *Essay*: in it, the German language scholar demonstrates the insufficiency of a purely lexical comparison,⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See Babington’s letter of July 27, 1828 to Humboldt, edited in Appendix C.

⁴¹ Letter conserved in Bonn (University Library; Inv. S 507: 23); published in Leitzmann (1908: 221-241), cf. Mattson (1980: nr. 8046). In this letter Humboldt brings up again the issue of the unfortunate errors in the printed version of the English translation of his manuscript. In 1832 August-Wilhelm Schlegel published, in French, some ‘reflections’ (Schlegel 1832), dedicated to the memory of Sir James Mackintosh, on the study of Indian languages and culture (literature, religion, mythology). Mackintosh and Schlegel had been close friends, who paid each other mutual visits. Curiously, in the *Réflexions* no mention is made of Humboldt’s 1828 *Essay*. The *Réflexions* are followed by a letter to Horace Wilson, in which Schlegel replies to Wilson’s criticisms of his Indological work. These two texts are followed by a number of shorter documents (including correspondence between Schlegel and the East India Company).

⁴² See Winternitz (1902).

⁴³ In his letter of July 27, 1828 (see Appendix C), Babington provided Humboldt with more information on Whish.

⁴⁴ As stated by Humboldt in his letter to Lassen (January 26, 1829), this methodological insight provided the impetus for accepting Johnston’s invitation to comment on Mackintosh’s *Plan*: “Er [viz. the dissertation] entstand durch äußere Veranlassung, es ist mir aber auch selbst lieb gewesen, mich einmal gegen die entsetzliche Manier

and formulates a strikingly modern criterion of historical-comparative grammar, involving the comparison of (sets of) linguistic forms in combination with the correspondence in phonic substance of the forms to be compared. Of course, Humboldt was not the first scholar who highlighted the danger of exclusively focusing on lexical commonalities (see Swiggers & Desmet 1996; Van Hal 2015 for further references), but, in comparison to earlier scholars, he proposed solid and precise principles; also, he was successful in exerting impact, especially in the Anglophone world, a fact predicted by Christian Lassen.⁴⁵ Subsequent generations of scholars in comparative linguistics have referred to Humboldt's *Essay* in order to show that proofs based on lexical materials are in need of further support. To quote one example: the Indo-European comparative scholar Hanns Oertel (1868–1952), a pupil of William Dwight Whitney who taught at Yale University, and later in Basle, Marburg, and Munich, quoted Humboldt's text, next to Schlegel's *Weisheit*, in his *Lectures on the Study of Language*, in order to illustrate the principle that linguistic comparison should be first and foremost rooted in grammatical comparison (Oertel 1902: 36; see also Abel 1886: 3-6).

In the second place, our text is interesting because it shows how missionary and colonial linguistics formed, in the early stages of 19th-century linguistics, the indispensable basis for scholarly work complying with the demands of "scientificity." We see here how, on the one hand, Humboldt criticizes methodologically deficient undertakings such as Mackintosh's *Plan*, and how, on the other hand, Humboldt is willing to rely on materials gathered by civil servants of the East India Company.⁴⁶

Linked to this, the third point of relevance resides in the interconnection of a scholar's network, viz. Humboldt's network, linking him to members of the *Royal Asiatic Society* (Johnston, Colebrooke, Babington), with the colonial-administrative network of the East India Company, the latter interacting with the *Royal Asiatic Society*. In this respect, it is worthwhile to stress that the East India Company, which in 1600 had started as a trading company, had

dieser bloßen Wörtervergleichen ordentlich aussprechen zu können." Cf. also Reutter's view (2011: 279-280) on Humboldt's motivation (see also *supra*, note 12).

⁴⁵ "Eine so klare Auseinandersetzung so einleuchtender Grundsätze, von der Autorität Ihres Namens begleitet, wird gewiss nicht auf einen unfruchtbaren Boden fallen; sie thut grade vorzüglich den Englischen Orientalisten Noth, die bis jetzt noch gar nicht aus dem Etymologischen Blindekuh Spielen herauskommen konnten" (Lassen to Humboldt, February 16, 1829); letter conserved in Cracow, Jagielloński Library (Coll. ling. fol. 21, Bl. 116-117), cf. Mueller-Vollmer (1993: 162-163). For the influence of Humboldt's ideas on Noah Webster Jr. (1758–1843), see, e.g., Read 1966: 174-175).

⁴⁶ However, for his investigations on the grammatical structure of Indian languages, Humboldt was dissatisfied with both the missionary and colonial sources; see his letter of December 13, 1828 to Julius Heinrich Klaproth (Dorow 1836: nr. 11; Mattson 1980: nr. 7960), in which he speaks about the poor sources available for the study of Tamil and Telugu.

risen to the status of a huge military and economic power, and had institutionalized training and education for future colonial administrators.⁴⁷

Finally, we have here a nice illustration of the dynamics and the complexity of circulation of knowledge – in the present case, linguistic, and also historical and ethnological knowledge – in connection with missionary and colonial incentives. The East India Company provided the conditions – access to the territories, instruction of future administrators, administrative control of areas, scientific documentation for political purposes – that made possible the collecting of grammatical and lexical information. The *Royal Asiatic Society* functioned as a storehouse and as a go-between in the conservation of materials, in the discussion of their value, and in the planning of activities.⁴⁸ As shown by the case of Mackintosh's endeavor and by Colebrooke's (not very successful) attempt of comprehensive collection of materials, civil administration and civil servants in the overseas territories were mobilized and stimulated in order to assess and enrich knowledge of indigenous population groups, their languages, their customs, and their literary and scientific (e.g., in mathematics) achievements. And scholars such as Humboldt superimposed their transcendent reflections on the work of these institutions and their "servants" and "members."

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⁴⁸ In this respect, the work by Xavier & Županov (2015) is of crucial significance: the authors show how British scholars tended to appropriate the scholarly work undertaken by (especially Catholic) missionaries (both European and christianized natives).

⁴⁹ The letters from and to Humboldt referred to in this article are published on the following digital research platform of the *Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften: Wilhelm von Humboldt: Sprachwissenschaftliche Korrespondenz*. <<wvh-briefe.bbaw.de>>.

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Appendices

A. Extract from a letter from Wilhelm von Humboldt to August-Wilhelm Schlegel (May 19, 1822)⁵⁰

Denn es giebt natürlich mehrere Grade und Arten der Verwandtschaft. Allein für weit schwieriger halte ich den Schluss auf die Verwandtschaft aus dem grammatischen Bau, u[nd] wenigstens muss man dabei, dünkt mich, nothwendig genau die verschiedenen Theile unterscheiden, aus welchem der grammatische Bau besteht. Man kann darin, meiner Erfahrung nach, unterscheiden: 1. dasjenige, was bloss auf Ideen u[nd] Ansichten beruht, u[nd] wovon man eine Schilderung machen kann, ohne nur Einen Laut der Sprache zu erwähnen; z.B. ob die Sprache eigne *Verba* hat, oder jedes Wort als ein Verbum behandeln kann, ob das *Pronomen* bloss den Begriff der Person enthält, oder auch den des Seyns und dadurch zum *Verbum substantivum* wird, ob es ein *passivum* giebt, oder man das *passivum* nur wie ein impersonales Activum behandelt u.s.f., 2. die Technischen Mittel, die grammatischen Verschiedenheiten zu bezeichnen, ob durch *Affixa*, Umlaut, Silbenwiederholung u.s.f. 3. die wirklichen Laute, die grammatischen Bildungssilben, wie das *a privativum*, die *Substantivendungen* u.s.f. Wo die Aehnlichkeit durch alle drei Punkte durchläuft, ist kein Zweifel über die Verwandtschaft vorhanden. Allein schwierig wird die Frage da, wo sie sich nur in dem einen, oder anderen findet? Der letzte hat eine sehr genaue Aehnlichkeit mit der Mittheilung wirklicher Wörter. Er gehört zum Theil zum lexikalischen Theil der Sprache, um so mehr, da in allen Sprachen viele *Affixa* ehemalige Wörter sind. An sich nicht verwandte Sprachen können daher auch darin gegenseitig von einander aufnehmen [...] Dieser Theil der Grammatik scheint mir am meisten für die Verwandtschaft, oder dagegen zu beweisen, weil er der speciellste ist, u[nd] die Aehnlichkeit, oder Verschiedenheit daher am wenigsten allgemeine Gründe haben kann, sondern auf zufälligeren historischen beruhen muss. Denn darauf kommt doch am Ende Alles zurück, wieviel in dem Sprachbau in Ansichten gegründet ist, die einen Grad der Allgemeinheit bei dem Menschengeschlecht überhaupt, oder bei gewissen unter gleichen Verhältnissen lebenden Nationen haben.

B. Letter from Wilhelm von Humboldt to Benjamin Guy Babington June 29, 1828 [stamped: June, 30]⁵¹

Baron Humboldt found between the papers Doctor B. Babington had the kindness to communicate to him last saturday, a letter of the Colonel Tod⁵² no[t] belonging to the matter of the Malayalam language. He has the honor to return it hereby to Dr. B. Babington.

He takes this opportunity of expressing his grateful feelings for the very interesting information Doctor B. Babington gave him in his letter on the dissertation of M^r. Ellis. What Doctor B. Babington said last saturday to the Baron, that he should take away the only copy of M^r. Ellis's dissertation⁵³

⁵⁰ Hoenigswald (1984: 98) summarizes the methodological relevance of this letter in the following terms: "It is all here. Humboldt saw that reconstructing "grammar" means at least two quite different things: (a) (his "third part") reconstructing morphs, in their phonological shapes – morphs which happen to have so-called grammatical meanings, such as inflectional and derivational affixes, and (b) (his "first part" and "second part", with an interesting subdivision) reconstructing, insofar as this can be done, those meanings, that is, reconstructing the grammatical structure per se, independently of phonological content. The former is, therefore, an aspect – and a very important one – of the recovery of the so-called basic vocabulary: endings are reconstructed, as are numerals, kinship terms of certain kinds, verb stems of frequent occurrence, and what not. The latter aims at the semantic and syntactic choices and obligatory distinctions. The former is amenable to the "Comparative" Method: when it comes to the latter we are never certain to what extent the classifications obtained are typological rather than genealogical." The letter was first published in Leitzmann (1908: 51-52, for the extract quoted here); cf. Mattson (1980: nr. 7219).

⁵¹ Copy conserved in the Library of the *American Philosophical Society* (B: H88.11 nr. 16); cf. Mattson (1980: nr. 7914).

⁵² Lieutenant-Colonel James Tod (1782–1835).

⁵³ Reference is made here to Ellis's second *Dissertation on the Malayáma Language* (cf. *supra*, note 53).

existing in Europe made such an impression on the Baron, that he proposed to Sir Alexander Johnston to leave the dissertation here on condition that the Asiatic society would reprint it immediately now and make common to the learned men of Europe the information which it contains. Sir Alexander Johnston promised to do so, and if D^r. B. Babington would condescend to add explaining [*sic*] and correcting notes to the dissertation, the Baron should be sure to have rendered a very much greater service to Philology by this way, than by translating the dissertation in its present state.

The notice Doctor B. Babington given to the Baron of M^r. Matthew Whish has been very interesting for him and he will certainly make use of it. He begs leave to Doctor B. Babington to communicate it to M^r. Burnouf at Paris whom the Baron believes to be a very much better judge of those subjects than himself, and to let him hope that D^r. B. Babington would introduce him at his request to M^r. Wish [*sic*]. But Baron Humboldt has the full conviction, that nothing should so much contribute to give a solid and profound knowledge of these languages of India, as if Doctor B. Babington would deign to offer to the Public his own investigations on that interesting subject.

C. Letter from Benjamin Guy Babington to Wilhelm von Humboldt July 27, 1828⁵⁴

D^r. Benjamin Babington is extremely sorry that he was not at home when Baron Humboldt did him the honor of calling. The dissertation which the Baron left for the Doctor's examination he has attentively read and has no hesitation in bearing testimony to the general correctness of the observations which it contains.

The relation which the Tamil bears to the cognate languages of the South of India, its independent origin as respects the Sanscrit, and its connection with the languages of Ceylon, Birma, of Java and Sumatra are subjects hitherto scarcely known and of very high interest. The Baron would therefore, in the Doctor's opinion, be doing an important service, in translating into the Continental languages the valuable essay of M^r. Ellis. Few persons will understand it throughout, because it requires for this purpose a previous acquaintance with both dialects of the Tamil. In order however to render it as intelligible as possible, it should be accompanied by an explanation of M^r. Ellis's system of Tamil orthography in the Roman character. It could also be well that the original Alphabets of the Tamil, Āriyam, Colezhutta, Vattezhutta, Cingalese, Birmese, Javanese and Sumatra species should be added. D^r. B. Babington has no doubt that the Dissertation was printed at the press of the Government College at Madras; but he has written to a friend to make further enquiries as to the period and immediate object of its publication. The letter press is extremely incorrect, and it should be carefully revised before a translation is undertaken.

When D^r. B. Babington testifies to the general correctness of M^r. Ellis's conclusions, he would not be understood as placing unlimited confidence in every assertion. M^r. Ellis was not a profound Malayalma⁵⁵ Scholar, and it would therefore be satisfactory to have what he has advanced verified by the examinations of a competent judge. Of all the individuals of D^r. B. Babington's acquaintance, M^r. Charles Matthew Whish, of the Madras Civil Service, is best able to undertake this task, being without doubt the most learned Malayalma Scholar in India. Should Baron Humboldt feel any wish to correspond with that Gentleman D^r. B. Babington will, with pleasure address a letter of introduction to M^r. W. who will doubtless consider it a high honor to be able to furnish any information to so distinguished a Philologist.

D^r. B. Babington encloses⁵⁶ a Tamil Alphabet with M^r. Ellis's orthography as deduced from the Dissertation. The Doctor has in his possession the Indian alphabets to which he has alluded, and his copies of the Colezhutta and Vattezhutta are, he believes, the only copies in Europe. If Baron Humboldt would desire facsimiles and will send any competent artist to D^r. B. B., he will with the greatest pleasure superintend his labours.

⁵⁴ Letter conserved in Cracow, Jagielloński Library (Coll. ling. fol. 56, pp. 47-50). See Mueller-Vollmer (1993: 232, 235).

⁵⁵ This is the designation used by Babington, most likely inspired by Ellis's use of the term *Malayālma*.

⁵⁶ The appendix to Babington's letter is not reproduced here.