Enchanted Tongues: The Idea of a Perfect Language and Religion in German Romantic Thought from Hamann to the Brothers Schlegel (1760–1840)

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Research question and methods

- **Question**: How did German Romantic thinkers imagine the concept of a perfect or ideal language and what role did their religious beliefs have in shaping their normative views about language?

- The idea of constructing a perfect language that mirrors reality was hitherto more associated with 17th-century English scholars. I argue that the Romantic period too was pervasively concerned with perfection in languages.

- Considering six pre-Romantics and Romantics—Hamann, Herder, Bernhardi, Humboldt, and Friedrich and August Schlegel, one can find idealisations of nature, art, poetry, music, philosophy, translation, and foreign cultures as models for language ideals.

- Religious ideas of these thinkers ranging from heterodox pantheism and Christian kabbalistic mysticism to dogmatic Christianity shaped their linguistic thought with wonder and enchantment.

- **Methods**: History of ideas approach bringing together contextual study of Romanticism with *longue durée* trajectory of perfect language theories.

Perfect language theories in history

- The medieval Jewish Kabbalah imagined the universe as the divine word, and Lull used combinations of primitives to describe complex truths.

- Early modern scholars like Wilkins, Descartes, and Leibniz tried to construct *a priori* rational scientific languages based on word taxonomies.

- Rational language theories experienced a brief revival in France during the French Revolution, but mostly declined thereafter. By the early 1900s, Esperanto and other *a posteriori* languages were developed for world peace.

- Esperanto failed to supersede English, but conlangs continue to be created.

German Romanticism, language, religion

- Romanticism was an aesthetic movement between 1790s–1820s stressing individuality, originality, imagination, nationhood, the bringing together of contradictions, etc.

- It was ideologically diverse, including radicals, liberals, and conservative royalists. There was much continuity with Enlightenment sentimentalism.

- English Romantics drew from the Lockean view of language as arbitrary signifiers, but the German side used Kabbalistic mysticism, idealising nature, poetry, reconciliation with foreign others (as in the Biblical Pentecost).

- Religious heterodoxies like pantheism and traditionalists stressing the organic unity of the Christian church were influential.

Hamann and Herder: Nature, poetry

- Hamann and Herder were pre-Romantics from the Königsberg, who both stressed the importance of language for thought.

- Hamann was a heterodox Lutheran, and saw language as of divine origin with nature being the purest manifestation of God's word.

- Hamann idealised primordial and Oriental languages and poetry, seeing their sensuousness and creativity to be closer to nature.

- Herder disagreed with the divine origin of language but concurred with Hamann on the sensuousness of poetry and primordial languages.

- Herder was a Lutheran pastor, but celebrated the unique individuality and path of each nation.

Bernhardi, Humboldt: Universals, diversity

- Bernhardi and Humboldt in Berlin thought of universals in language, different from Hamann and Herder's subjectivity.

- Bernhardi held philosophical language rather than poetry as the ideal, and envisioned a pantheistic union of both prose and poetry.

- Humboldt took up universals but also subjectivised the *Weltansicht* of each language, respecting pantheism and diversity.

- Humboldt recognised multiple kinds of linguistic perfection, with Sanskrit and Greek closest to the universal structures.
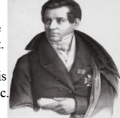
The Schlegels: The other and the self

- The young Friedrich and August Schlegel from Hanover were pluralists, inclusive of marginal artistic styles and foreign cultures.

- Fredrich became a conservative Catholic in 1808. He then idealised the organic unity of Indo-European languages along with the unity of church and tradition.

- August's translation theory was more accepting of foreign cultures, upholding the importance of intermixing for improvement.
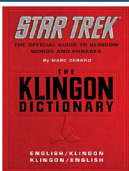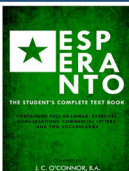
- August saw the medieval Christian synthesis of Germanic and Roman values as Romantic.

Historical significance

- Normative thinking about language ideals was a key part of Romanticism, which has declined in professional linguistics.

- Secularisation is a problematic concept in European history. Religious views continued to shape intellectual work.