

Seminar SAW

Seminar History of Science, History of Text, 2011-2016

organized by Karine Chemla, Agathe Keller and Christine Proust and all the HSHT group of the project SAW

A lecture by Tsuka Benes (College of William & Mary, VA, USA)

Paris Diderot University, Condorcet Building
February 12th, 2016 Room 483A – 2pm to 4pm

On Language-Structure and the Indian Positional Method: The Humboldt Brothers, Comparative Linguistics, and the Autonomy of Palpable Math

Abstract – Alexander von Humboldt’s essay “Über die bei verschiedenen Völkern üblichen Systeme von Zahlzeichen und über den Ursprung des Stellenwerthes in den indischen Zahlen” (1829) adapted the procedures of comparative grammar to explain the origin of the Indian positional method. This paper, first, positions Alexander’s argument in relation to the typology of language-structures and corresponding writing systems articulated by his brother Wilhelm in his Academy address “Ueber die Buchstabenschrift und ihren Zusammenhang mit dem Sprachbau” (1824). Unlike Friedrich Schlegel, Alexander von Humboldt declined to see the Indian method deterministically as an outgrowth of the supposedly organic, inflecting grammar of Sanskrit. Both Humboldt brothers granted considerable autonomy to the practices of palpable mathematics, adapting only by analogy the insights of linguists. Second, this paper explores the contributions comparative-historical linguists themselves, inspired by Alexander’s essay, including August Friedrich Pott and the Egyptologist Richard Lepsius, made to the history of non-western counting systems.

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