

Level: Second Year

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American Structuralism

Introduction

The American scholars were anthropologists who developed structural ideas far away from European work. They worked on existing languages, the Amerindian languages. Field work techniques of anthropologists characterized their approach. These languages did not have written records or previous descriptions as opposed to the European languages. Therefore, their historical aspects were discarded. The Amerindian languages were very different from the European ones. Thus, American structuralists, were in need to develop fresh descriptive frameworks fitting these languages' actual features. American work emphasized the **uniqueness** of each language's structure, similar to the European tradition. The leading figures of the American structural studies were Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Leonard Bloomfield. American linguists, like their contemporaries in Europe, were all influenced by the structuralist views of Saussure. It had become evident among linguists that:

- Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive.
- Spoken language should also be studied.
- Language is structured and self-contained.
- Language is a system (of signs)
- Relation between form and meaning is arbitrary.
- Study of languages is synchronic.

1- Specific features of American Structuralism

- a- Influence of behaviourist psychology
- b- Strong empiricist view: All knowledge comes from experience
- c- Focus on American Indian languages
- d- Descriptive linguistics under the influence of Behaviourist psychology : Behaviourism was the only school of psychology to define away its subject matter Specific features of American Structuralism. In psychology Behaviorism (1920s-1950s) rejected the focus on mental processes and stressed measurement based on objective behaviour.

Therefore: Human behaviour is learned from the environment – We can only study what we can observe

- We cannot observe the mind, so we must assume that it does not exist
- We can observe the environment and behaviour, so let's assume this is all that exists

Behaviourist Psychologists such as B. F. Skinner (1904-1990), believe that children learn language through shaping (correction of speech errors). In other words, they asked the question: does experience (reward and punishment) shape behaviour?

They established “The associative chain theory” that assumes that each word in a sentence serves as a stimulus for the next word, and the entire sentence is produced left to right.

2-Immediate Constituent Analysis: ICA

ICA is a system of grammatical analysis that divides sentences into successive layers, or constituents, until, in the final layer, each constituent consists of only a word or meaningful part of a word. (A constituent is any word or construction that enters into some larger construction.) In the sentence “The young thief ran away,” the first division into immediate constituents would be between “the young thief” and “ran away.” The immediate constituents of “the young thief” are “the” and “young thief.” At the next level “young thief” is divided into “young” and “thief.” The term was introduced by the United States linguist Leonard Bloomfield in 1933, though the underlying principle is common both to the traditional practice of parsing and to many modern systems of grammatical analysis.

4-American Structuralists’ Main Contributions

Leonard Bloomfield: Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) was a major influence in the shift of linguistics from the historical and comparative study of languages prevalent during the 19th century to the description of the structure of languages in the 20th century. He defined himself as a behaviorist. He formulated theoretical and methodological principles based on structural linguistics for the teaching of foreign languages and didactic material specifically for the teaching of Russian and Dutch. He offered what was probably the first systematic, detailed, and complete application of structural linguistics to the teaching of reading, combining the analysis of the relations between alphabetical writing and speech with the knowledge of the structure of languages in general and of the English language in particular.

b- Sapir–Whorf hypothesis: Established by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf and also known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis, refers to the proposal that the particular language one speaks influences the way one thinks about reality, “**that language determines thought**”. Linguistic relativity stands in close relation to the general relation of language and thought, and how patterns of language use in cultural context can affect thought. They claimed that language and thought are interwoven, there is no possibility to separate them which makes every language different from other languages. An example of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is the fact that our way we use language about men and women comes from our view to them: we say :”fireman” or “policeman” which gives as a belief that these professions are specifically for men while the word “nurse” is for women specifically. If we point as a man working as a nurse we need to say: a male nurse. These words are the result of cultural beliefs about the role of men and women in society.