Lesson 6: American Structuralism

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Outline

- What is American Structuralism?

- Origins of American structuralism

- Principles of American Structuralism

- Contributions of American Structuralism to Linguistics

What is American Structuralism?

- **Definition:**

American Structuralism is a linguistic approach focusing on describing the structures of languages, emphasizing their uniqueness and synchronic analysis.

- **Founded:**

Early 20th century, influenced by Saussure's ideas and anthropology.

Founders of American Structuralism

Franz Boas: Initiated the study of indigenous American languages.

Leonard Bloomfield: Formalized structural linguistics as a science.

Origins of American structuralism

1. Rooted in Anthropology

2. Influenced by Behaviorist Psychology

Origins of American structuralism

- **Rooted in Anthropology:** Focused on understanding languages through cultural and fieldwork studies.

- American linguistic studies emerged from the **institutes of anthropology** rather than from the institutes of languages.

- They worked on existing languages, the **Amerindian languages**

- These languages **did not have written records** or previous descriptions as opposed to the European languages. Therefore, their historical aspects were discarded and the focus was on **describing them**

Origins of American structuralism

- **Influenced by Behaviorist Psychology**

- **Behaviorism** implies that all human behaviors are learned through interactions with the environment (**Stimulus, response, reinforcement**).
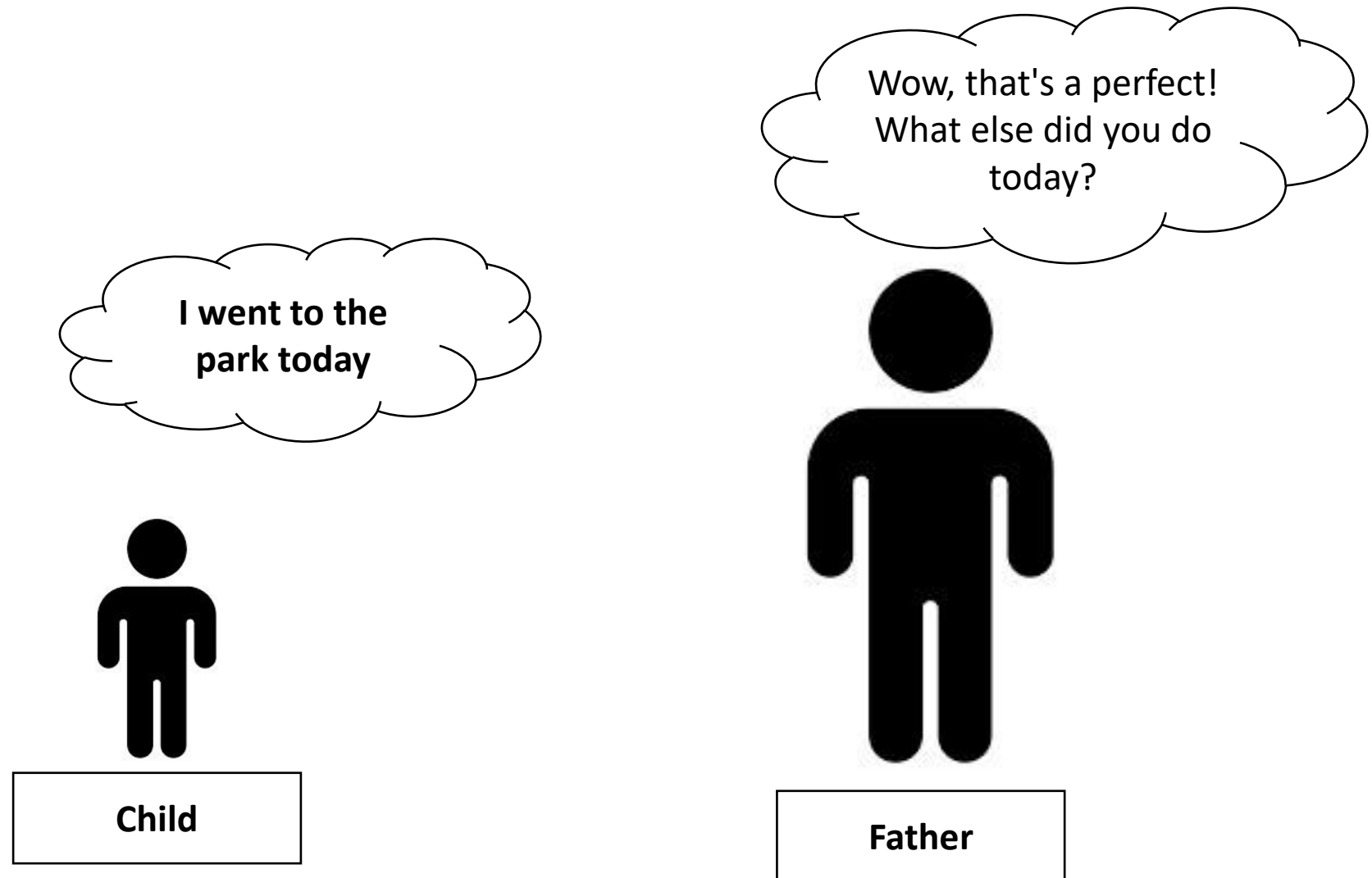
Origins of American structuralism

- **Influenced by Behaviorist Psychology**

- **Behaviorism** implies that all human behaviors are learned through interactions with the environment

1. **Stimulus:** things that trigger a response,
2. **Response:** reactions to stimuli
3. **Reinforcement:** rewards or punishments that make behaviors more or less likely to happen

Reward (Positive reinforcement)

- **Example**

Punishment (Negative reinforcemtn)

• **Example**

Principles of American Structuralism

1. Language is a self-contained system

2. The study of language should be descriptive, not prescriptive

3. Priority of studying language at a single point (Synchronic Study)

4. Focus on Spoken Language

1. Language as a System

- Language is a self-contained system where each element is defined by their relationship to other elements within the system.

Example

1. "He aims to *perfect* his painting skills"

2. "His performance was perfect"

2. Descriptive, Not Prescriptive

- American structuralism focuses on describing language as it is used.

- **Example:**

Recording regional accents instead of correcting them.

3. Synchronic Study

- Studies languages at a particular point in time.

- **Example:**
Analyzing modern spoken English without tracing its historical roots.

4. Focus on Spoken Language

- Emphasis on oral traditions and speech.

- **Example:**

Research on Amerindian languages without written records.

Contributions to Linguistics

1. Immediate Constituent Analysis (ICA)

2. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic relativity)

1. Immediate Constituent Analysis (ICA)

- Immediate Constituent Analysis (ICA) is a way to break down a sentence into smaller parts (Constituents) to understand its structure.

1. Immediate Constituent Analysis (ICA)

- Example

The young thief ran away

"The young thief" (*the subject*)

"ran away" (*the action*)

The (determiner)

young (adj *describing the noun)

Thief (noun)

ran (verb *action)

away (adv *indicating direction)

2. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic relativity)

- Linguistic relativity is the proposal that the particular language we speak influences the way we think about reality.

2. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic relativity)

Example

Policeman   Nurse

2. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic relativity)

Example

Policeman

Nurse

2. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic relativity)

- **Example**

Female police officer

Male nurse

Discussion

- Compare American and European Structuralism.

- Identify similarities and differences in their approach to language study.

Differences between American and European structuralism

	AMERICAN STRUCTURALISM	EUROPEAN STRUCTURALISM
Focus	Focused on unwritten and endangered languages, especially Amerindian languages.	Primarily focused on well-documented European languages.
Methodology	Used real language data, focusing on what can be observed, influenced by behaviorism.	Focused more on theory and ideas about language.
Roots	Came from anthropology and fieldwork, with attention to culture.	Based on the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure on language.
Synchronic vs. Diachronic	Focused on studying languages as they are at one point in time.	Focused on current languages but also looked at how languages change over time.

QUESTIONS