

Course : Linguistics

Level : L2

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Unit: 2 American structuralism

Lesson 6

American Structuralism

Introduction

American structuralism generally refers to the study of structural linguistics in North America from the 1920s to late 1950s. American and European structuralism shared a number of features. Both European and American linguists tended to emphasize **the structural uniqueness of individual languages**. There was especially good reason to take this point of view given the conditions in which American linguistics developed from **the end of the 19th century**. There were hundreds of indigenous **American Indian languages** that **had never been previously described**. Many of these were **spoken** by only a handful of speakers. Therefore, American structuralism began in the early 20th century as **anthropologists sought to record indigenous American languages before they went extinct**. First, there are three pioneering scholars: **Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Leonard Bloomfield**. Each of them differed in significant ways from the other two, but all three **helped set the tone for the emergence of a version of structuralism native to the United States** influenced by Saussure's structuralist view 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. Characteristics of American Structuralism

- Began as an offshoot of anthropology
- Influenced by behaviourist psychology
- Focused on native American languages, which were dying out
- Neglect of semantics
- Attempted to develop a methodology to describe any corpus in terms of the distribution of its expression-elements relative to each other.

Behaviorism is an area of psychological study that focuses on observing and analyzing how controlled environmental changes affect behavior. Simply put, strict behaviorists believe that all behaviors are the

result of experience. Any person, regardless of their background, can be trained to act in a particular manner given the right conditioning.

B.F. Skinner was an influential American psychologist known for his work in behaviourism, which emphasizes the study of observable behaviors and their responses to environmental stimuli. He built upon the work of earlier psychologists like Ivan Pavlov and Edward L. Thorndike to develop the concept of operant conditioning. This theory posits that behaviour is shaped by reinforcement or punishment, which can increase or decrease the likelihood of a behavior being repeated.

Behaviourism in education, or behavioral learning theory is a branch of psychology that focuses on how people learn through their interactions with the environment. It is based on the idea that all behaviors are acquired through conditioning, which is a process of reinforcement and punishment.

Corpus Analysis refers to the empirical analysis of linguistic characteristics and patterns associated with language use in different contexts.

The main influential figures in American structuralism

Franz Boas (1859–1942) was the most influential figure in the field of anthropology. In the realm of linguistic anthropology, Boas emphasized the importance of studying languages within their specific cultural and historical contexts. He argued that language shapes thought and perception, with different languages offering unique worldviews. His emphasis on linguistic fieldwork influenced generations of anthropologists to engage with native speakers and gather primary language data, setting a benchmark in anthropology.

Edward Sapir (1884-1939) was one of the foremost American linguists and anthropologists of his time, most widely known for his contributions to the study of North American Indian languages. A founder of ethnolinguistics, which considers the relationship of culture to language, he was also a principal developer of the American (descriptive) school of structural linguistics.. He wrote in 1931 that a thorough description of a linguistic structure and its function in speech might provide insight into humans' perceptive and cognitive faculties and help explain the diverse behavior among peoples of different cultural backgrounds.

Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949)

Leonard Bloomfield founded American **structuralism**, based on structural linguistics developed by **Saussure**. Bloomfield is known for applying the principles of behaviorist psychology to linguistics, defining "*the meaning of a linguistic form as the situation in which the speaker utters it, and the response it calls forth in the hearer.*" (Oller, 1979). Leonard Bloomfield systematized the field with his 1933 book *Language*, laying out principles like focusing description on spoken language over written texts and **defining grammar based on form not meaning**. Bloomfield and his followers developed techniques like phonemic analysis and focused on language forms over meaning, which they saw as difficult to study objectively. American structuralism aimed to develop discovery procedures that could

systematically analyze any language, though its neglect of meaning drew later criticism. It significantly influenced the field through the 1950s with its emphasis on describing unwritten languages as unique structural systems.

Sapir–Whorf hypothesis : Established by Edward Sapir and Benjamin states that language influences thought and perception of reality. It is also called linguistic relativity, because it focuses on how different languages lead to differences in perception.

Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) is, together with Edward SAPIR, one of the two most prominent American linguists of the first half of the twentieth century. His book Language (Bloomfield, 1933) was the standard introduction to linguistics for thirty years following its publication. Together with his students, particularly Bernard Bloch, Zellig Harris, and Charles Hockett, Bloomfield established the school of thought that has come to be known as American structural linguistics, which dominated the field until the rise of GENERATIVE GRAMMAR in the 1960s.

2-Immediate Constituent Analysis (ICA)

The term **ICA** was first introduced by Bloomfield in 1939. The technique of Immediate constituent of analysis or I.C. analysis is used to analyze utterances to their components or constituents. In other words, this technique shows how any given construction can be broken down to smallest meaningful units.

