

Unit two: American structuralism

Lesson 06: PRINCIPLES of AMERICAN STRUCTURALISM

American and European structuralism shared a number of features. In insisting upon the necessity of treating each language as a more or less coherent and integrated system, both European and American linguists of this period tended to emphasize, if not to exaggerate, the structural uniqueness of individual languages. Structuralism proposes a Collective term for a number of linguistic approaches in the first half of the twentieth century, all based on the work of F. de Saussure, but strongly divergent from one another. While 'structuralism' in its narrower sense refers to de Saussure's linguistic theories, in its broader sense it is an umbrella term for approaches in anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism, which - in analogy to linguistic structuralism - concentrate on synchronic analysis rather than on genetic / historical preconditions, in order to expose the universal structures at work under the surface of social relations.

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.

Features of American Structuralism

1. Influence of behaviourist psychology
2. Study procedures
3. Focus on American Indian languages
4. Corpus-based analyses
5. Descriptive (taxonomic) linguistics

- 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.
- American structuralists avoided the prescriptive attitude because they were in need to develop fresh descriptive frameworks fitting these languages' actual features.
- They also emphasized the uniqueness of each language's structure.
- American linguistics aimed at
 - o Describing current spoken language, not dead languages.
 - o Focusing on language form as a sole objective, thus neglecting meaning to a subordinate place.
 - o Performing the description of language using an organized, unprejudiced and meticulous method which allows the analyst to extract the grammar of a language from a corpus of recorded data in a quasi-mechanical way following four steps:
 - a) Field recordings of a corpus of data;
 - b) Segmentation of the utterances of the corpus at different levels: phoneme, morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence;
 - c) Listing an inventory of forms thus obtained from each level and stating the distribution (possible environment) of the forms;
 - d) Classifying the forms (by giving them names) and utterances of the language being studied.