



American Structuralism

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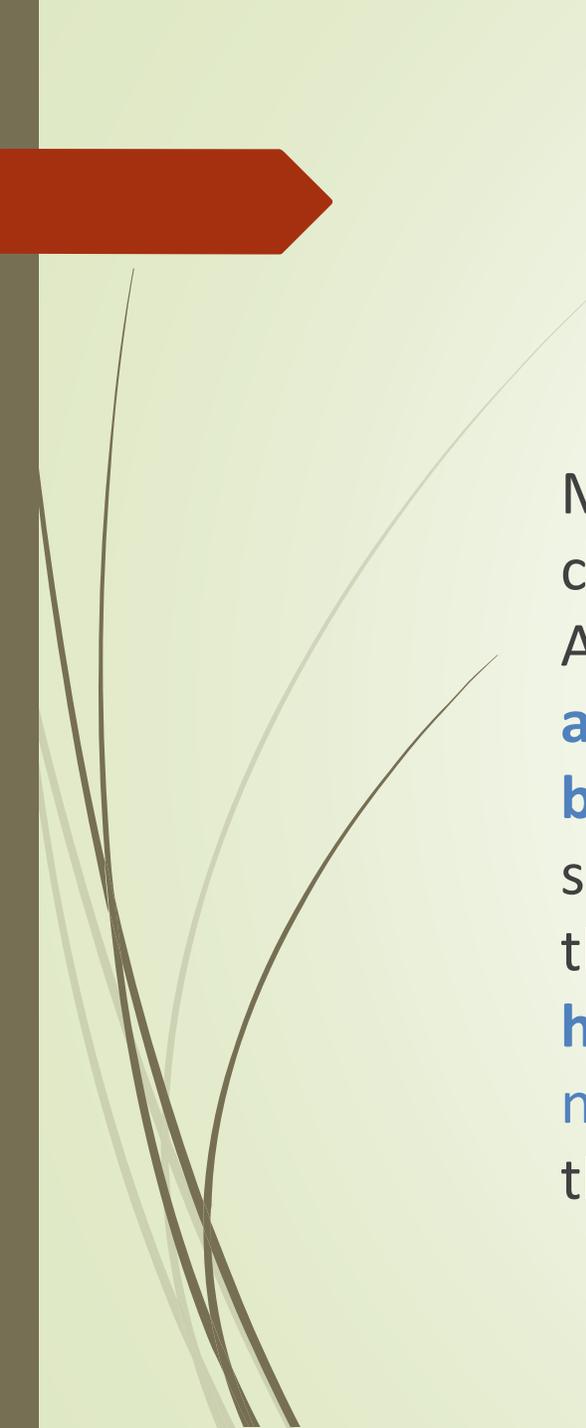
Learning objectives

In this lecture, students will be introduced to

- American structuralism
- Its founders
- Its principles
- Its contributions

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 the Indian American languages in the end of the nineteenth century 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:



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- 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

Characteristics of American Structuralism

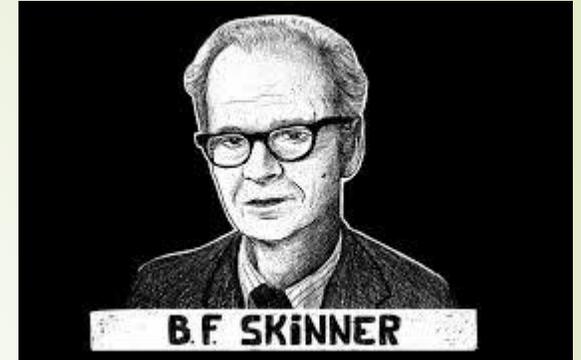
- Began as an offshoot of anthropology
- Influenced by **behaviourist psychology**
- Focused on native American languages, which were dying out
- Neglect of semantics
- ➔ Attempted to develop a methodology to describe any **corpus** in terms of the distribution of its expression-elements relative to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



Behaviourism

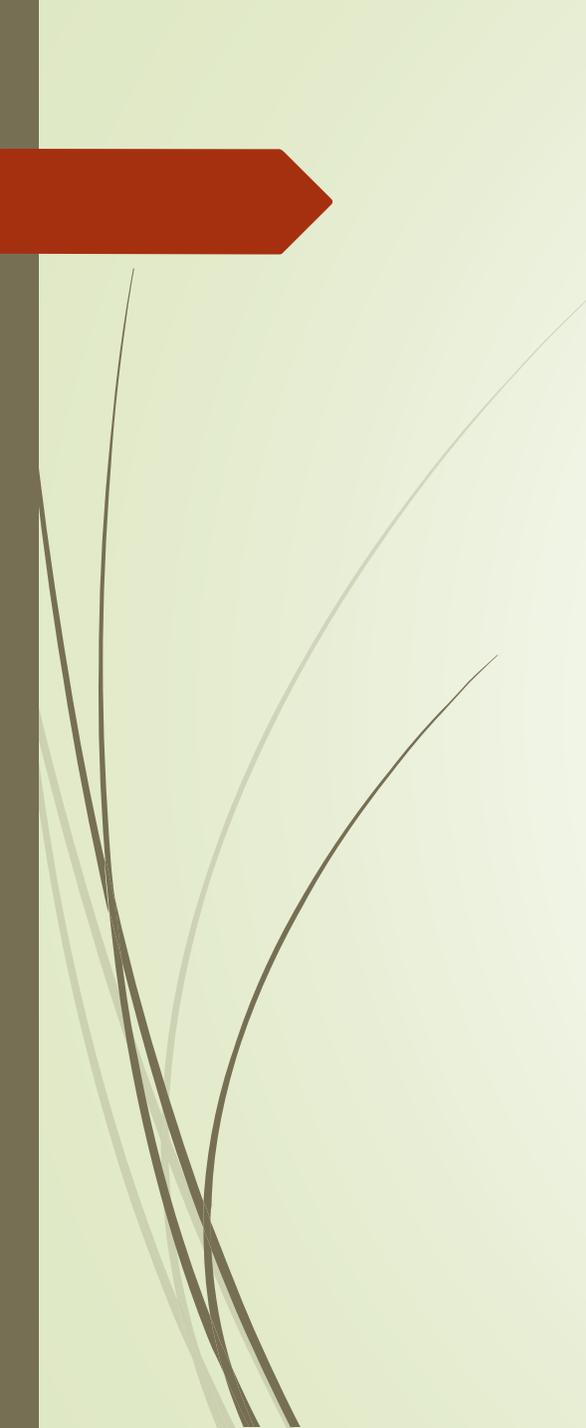
Behaviourism is an area of psychological study that focuses on observing and analyzing how controlled environmental changes affect behavior. Simply put, strict behaviourists believe that all behaviours are the result of experience. Any person, regardless of their background, can be trained to act in a particular manner given the right conditioning.

B.F. Skinner

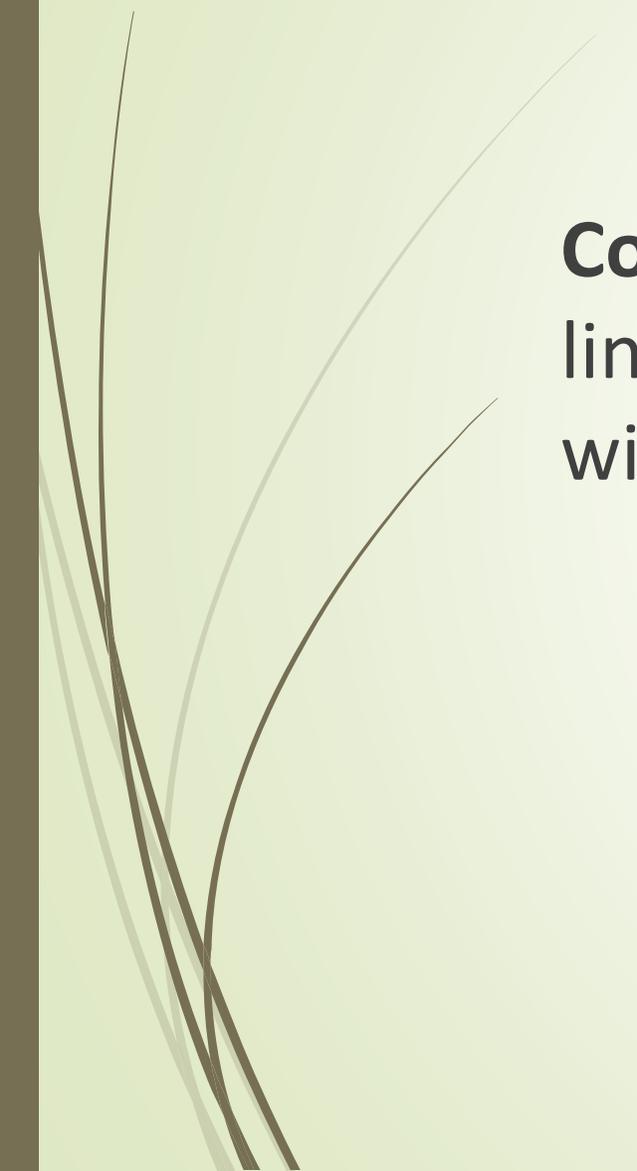


B.F. Skinner was an influential American psychologist known for his work in behaviourism, which emphasizes the study of observable behaviors and their responses to environmental stimuli. He built upon the work of earlier psychologists like **Ivan Pavlov** and **Edward L. Thorndike** to develop the concept 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.

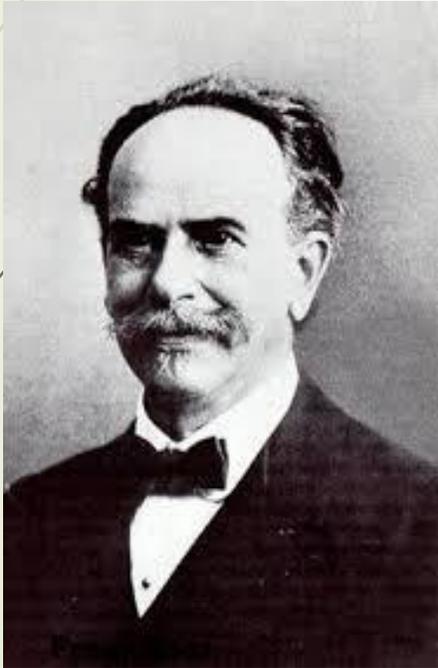


Behaviourism in education, or behavioural learning theory is a branch of psychology that focuses on how people learn through their interactions with the environment. It is based on the idea that all behaviours are acquired through conditioning, which is a process of reinforcement and punishment.



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.



Sapir–Whorf hypothesis: Established by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf 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.

Immediate Constituent Analysis: ICA

The term **ICA** was proposed by Wilhelm Wundt and named and 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.

