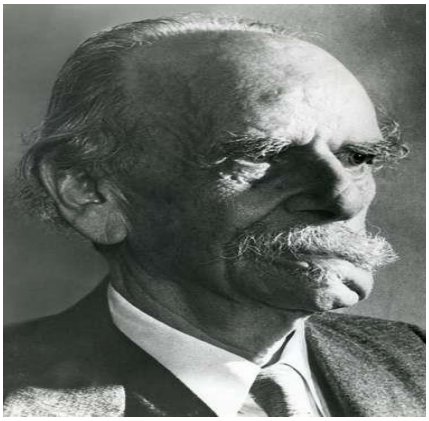
Unit two: American structuralism

Lesson 07: American Structuralists

Structural linguistics in Europe was partly concerned with meaning and interpretation but in N. America **Franz Boas** and **Leonard Bloomfield** took a more descriptive/ positivist stance. They also reversed de Saussure's emphasis on the creative aspect of everyday language.

1. Franz Boas (1859–1942)



- Major changes in the study of Amerindian languages came about as a result of the influence of ***Franz Boas***. Boas took up linguistic work originally as a necessary tool for the investigation of culture, language being a particularly revealing aspect of culture. *The Handbook of American Indian Languages* written by Boas marks a major turning point in the study of linguistics in America.

2. Edward Sapir (1884–1939)

The German-born American anthropologist Edward Sapir (1884–1939) was responsible for many enduring concepts in linguistic research. Author of the landmark volume *Language* (1921), Sapir emphasizes that language is tightly linked to culture. For Sapir, language is an acquired function of culture rather than being biologically determined. This view is diametrically opposed to that of the transformationalists, who believe (but have not proved) that human beings possess a genetically determined predisposition for language—including many of its most specific and distinguishing features—that is already present at the moment of birth.

3. **Benjamin Lee Whorf**, (1897- 1941) U.S. linguist noted for his hypotheses regarding the relation of language to thinking and cognition and for his studies of Hebrew and Hebrew ideas, of Mexican and Mayan languages and dialects, and of the Hopi language. Under the influence of Edward Sapir, at Yale University, Whorf developed the concept of the equation of culture and language, which became known as the **Whorf hypothesis, or the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**. Whorf maintained that the structure of a language tends to condition the ways in which a speaker of that language thinks. Hence, the structures of different languages lead the speakers of those languages to view the world in different ways.

3. Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949)

Although Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) was a contemporary and colleague of Sapir. In 1914, he wrote *Introduction to the Study of Language,* which in later editions was called simply *Language* (1933). Bloomfield was responsible for an enormously influential synthesis that brought together three earlier traditions of language study (historical, philological, and practical), and forged them into a coherent whole. He was fiercely determined to establish linguistics as a science. Bloomfield was especially critical of those who took the features of Latin as the normative form of human speech. He was much more favorably disposed toward the grammatical studies of the ancient Indians because the latter were themselves excellent phoneticians who had also developed an intelligent systematization of grammar and lexicon.

Immediate constituent analysis, also called Ic Analysis:

In **linguistics**, 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 old man ran away," the first division into immediate constituents would be between "the old man" and "ran away." The immediate constituents of "the old man" are "the" and "old man." At the next level "old man" is divided into "old" and "man." 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.