

# THE DESCRIPTIVISTS

Schools and Theories of  
Linguistics

# Synchronic Linguistics in America

- Emerged independently and in a very different style at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries when Saussure was working out his ideas in Europe.

# Linguists to discuss:

## 1. Franz Boas:

- 1858-1942
- Physics, geography, anthropology, linguistics
- Language is important to understand and to describe various aspects of a culture

## 2. Leonard Bloomfield:

- 1887-1949
- Studying linguistics in traditional style (a nephew of Maurice Bloomfield, a leading American historical linguist)
- The status of linguistics as a science

# Boas' Belief and Works Related to Language (1)

- People are normally unconscious of the principles on which their language operates
- Organizer of Smithsonian Institution, focusing on languages of America north of Mexico
- His *Handbook of American Indian Languages* was published in 1911
- Trainer of other language investigation; all the great names of American linguists learned from him at first or second hand

## Boas' Belief and Works Related to Language (2)

- Facing with the severely practical problem of working out what the current structure of various utterly alien languages was like
- The description of an individual language was an end in itself, or a necessary first step towards understanding the wider culture of a particular community
- Abstract linguistic theorizing as a means to the end of successful practical description of particular languages, and not vice versa.

## Boas' Relativism (1)

- Taking the theories for granted and concentrating on the data
- His purely self-taught linguist was necessary in approaching American Indian languages to discard any presuppositions about the nature of language inherited from a European background
- Many orthodox linguists sometimes flatly refused to believe the results he was publishing
- There was no ideal type of language; human languages were endlessly diverse

## Boas' Relativism (2)

- No basis of truth in saying that the structure of language spoken by some primitive tribes is 'arbitrary' and irrational
- Against the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics who thought that race in the genetic sense, language and culture are three separate issues by no means necessarily go together

# Boas' Arguments that There are no Primitive Languages (1)

- The human mouth can make many more different sounds than the Roman alphabet has letters; if an exotic language contains a sound falling between two sounds familiar to a European, he will hear the alien sound as alternating between this two;
- Exotic languages, like European ones, have groups of allophones in complementary distribution; whereas each of us has learned to ignore the differences between allophones in his own language, we notice such differences in alien languages because they often correspond to distinctions which are phonemic for us, and thus we perceive the alien language as confusing separate sounds in an irrational way;



# Boas' Arguments that There are no Primitive Languages (2)

- Each of these sources of misunderstanding between the speakers of European and exotic languages is perfectly symmetrical (speakers of an American Indian language would equally hear English as containing alternating sounds.

# About the Syntactic and Semantic Aspects of Language

Two points are often claimed to be the characteristics of 'primitive languages':

1. Many languages fail to distinguish singular from plural;
2. They deal only in the concrete and not to tolerate the formation of abstract concepts.

# Boas' Assumption based on Kwakiutl (a language of British Columbia he studied)

- In Kwakiutl a noun can occur only with an inflection indicating the possessor so that one can speak of 'my love' but not of 'love' as a general phenomenon.
- In every language there are certain logical categories which must be obligatorily expressed whether relevant to a particular message or not. Ex: a) the distinction between one and more-than one for a noun is obligatory in English; b) the use of inflection showing whether the narrator personally witnessed the action reported, or he knows of it by evidence or by hearsay, or he merely dreamed it for a verb is obligatory in Kwakiutl.
- Logical terms such as *quality* and *essence* (abstract nouns) are commonplace in European languages; the general notion of 'love' made sense to Kwakiutl speakers but it was quite unidiomatic.

# Bloomfield

- He was an American linguist who led the development of structural linguistics in the United States during the 1930s and the 1940s.
- His influential textbook *Language*, published in 1933, presented a comprehensive description of American structural linguistics.
- He made significant contributions to Indo-European historical linguistics, the description of Austronesian languages, the description of Sanskrit and description of languages of the Algonquian family.
- He was one of the founding members of the Linguistic Society of America.

# Bloomfield's Career and Works

- The study of American Indian languages of the Algonquian family, and of certain languages of the Philippine Islands
- *Language*, a book published in 1933
- The prime mover behind the foundation of the Linguistic Society of America in 1924, organizing linguistics as a profession
- The main points of his theories are similar to Boas; however they are often stated more explicitly and with more elaboration
- Influenced by logical positivism (by Rudolf Carnap and the Vienna Circle: *Either P or not P, empirical*), but an active proponent of positivist ideas as they applied to the study of human behavior, including language
- A monograph on 'Linguistic Aspects of Science' 1939 (in International Encyclopedia of Unified Science)

# Bloomfield's Behaviorism

- He emphasized on the status of linguistics as a science.
- He emphasized on formal procedures for the analysis of linguistic data.
- He was not merely passively influenced by logical positivism but became an active proponent of positivist ideas as they applied to the study of human behavior, including language.

# Bloomfield's Early Studies

- Indo-European linguistics: historical Germanic studies, Indo-European and Germanic phonology and morphology, emphasized the Neogrammarian principle of regular sound change as a foundational concept in historical linguistics
- Sanskrit studies: palatal consonants in Sanskrit, one article on the Sanskrit grammatical tradition associated with Pāṇini
- Austronesian linguistics: research on Tagalog, an Austronesian language spoken in the Philippines

# **Bloomfield's Algonquian linguistic Studies**

- Bloomfield's work on Algonquian languages had both descriptive and comparative components.
- He published extensively on four Algonquian languages: Fox, Cree, Menominee, and Ojibwe, publishing grammars, lexicons, and text collections.