**Lecture Two**

**The Rise of Structuralism**

**2. American Structural Linguistics**

Franz Boas (1858- 1942) is considered the founder of American linguistics and American anthropology. His major concern was to obtain information on Native American languages and cultures before they disappeared.

Edward Sapir -Boas' student- (1884–1939) did first-hand fieldwork on many American Indian languages, contributed to historical linguistics (in Indo-European, Semitic, and numerous Native American families). Sapir defended the perception that each language has its own sound system, within which a determinate set of speech sounds are distinguished by specific features. The Whorf (or Sapir-Whorf) hypothesis (known also as linguistic determinism/ linguistic relativism) holds that a speaker's perception of the world is organized or constrained by the linguistic categories his or her language offers, that language structure determines thought, how one experiences and hence how one views the world. Whorf (1956 p. 20) claimed that “ people who use languages with very different grammars are led by these grammars to typically different observations and different values for outwardly similar observations”.

Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) is credited with giving American structuralism its fundamental form, making linguistics an autonomous field of science. Bloomfield's (1933) “*Language”* is considered a milestone in linguistics in which he put rigorous methods ‘discovery Procedures’ (Immediate Constituent Analysis ICA) which are rules and principles that would enable a linguist to discover in an exact way the description of any language. This book showed that Bloomfield was influenced by both De Saussure's thinking and behaviorist psychology. He defended that language study should deal objectively and systematically with observable data and describe what is being seen -external not internal-, hence, linguistics should focus on form not meaning. Henceforth, Bloomfield’s ICA was criticised for neglecting meaning, not being able to give clear directions in the case of binary cuttings such as: (That nice, efficient, old-fashioned secretary) and the problem of pre-position and post-position, not being able to show the relationship between sentences (passive/ active, affirmative/ negative…), not being able to explain ambiguities in sentences.

Till then, structural linguistics was influenced by psychological behaviourism; in other words, the psychologist can account for mental states through observing behaviour, the linguist similarly can discover and describe language through describing already produced patterns. However, this linguistic model was rejected by Chomsky who clarified that the corpus may contain errors as is may not include enough illustrations of the phenomenon under investigation (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 1999).

Linguistics since 1957 (the publication of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*), has been dominated by Chomsky’s (1928-) ideas. Unlike the Bloomfieldians, Chomsky brought back *mentalism*. He criticized Bloomfieldian linguistics for being too ambitious and too limited in scope; ambitious in that it was unrealistic to expect providing rules for a perfect description from a corpus (revolution against discovery procedures), and it was too limited because it concentrated only on already produced utterances while the language has infinite number of utterance (linguistic creativity). Therefore, a grammar -for Chomsky- should be more than a catalogue of old utterances, it should also take into account possible future utterances.

Similar to De Saussure’s notion of *langue/Parole*, Chomsky introduced *Competence/ performance.* “Competence” id what a native speaker knows, implicitly, of his or her language. Performance is the individual production of actual utterances, the latter can be affected by physical and psychological situations of the native speakers including memory limitations, distractions, shift of attention …, hence, *performance* is not an accurate realization of *competence.*

For him, a grammar which describes actual utterances is a *descriptive grammar*, and a grammar which consists of a set of rules which specify sequences of language that are possible and those impossible is a *generative grammar.* Thus, the goal of a grammar is to account for the native speaker's “competence” which enable them to produce or generate new sentences. The notion of generative grammar was invented to make *explicit* the notion of “competence”; a generative grammar is a formal system (of rules, later of principles and parameters) which makes explicit the finite mechanisms available to the brain to produce infinite sentences in ways that have empirical consequences and can be tested as in the natural sciences.

Initiating the era of transformational generative grammar, Chomsky redirected the goal of linguistic theory towards attempting to provide a rigorous and formal characterization of the notion “possible human language,” called “Universal Grammar.” In his view, the aim of linguistics is to go beyond the study of individual languages to determine what the universal properties of human language in general are, and to establish the “universal grammar” that accounts for the range of differences among human languages. The theory of grammar relies on certain general principles which govern the form of the grammar and the nature of the categories with which it operates. These principles are conceived of as universal properties of language, properties that are biologically innate.

Chomsky maintained that rather than being born blank slates, children have a genetic predisposition to acquire linguistic knowledge in a highly specific way. In other words, the child’s construction of if the internalized grammar of his/ her language (or the I- Language) is predetermined by the human genetic endowment, a “language Faculty” containing “Universal Grammar” which provides the nature and number of choices that need to be made when internalizing the grammar of a particular language.

Since this theory began, it has evolved through versions called “Standard Theory,” “Extended Standard Theory” (and “The Lexicalist Hypothesis”), “Trace Theory,” “Government and Binding” (later called “Principles and Parameters” approach), and finally “the Minimalist Program.”

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