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American Structuralism

Structuralism emerged with Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's "Structural Linguistics." Though he died before publishing, his students' notes preserved his ideas. His theory remained in development, influencing diverse work in Eastern Europe and the US.

American and European structuralism shared several key features. Both approaches emphasized the importance of treating each language as a unique, coherent, and integrated system. This perspective was especially influential in American linguistics, which developed in response to the need to document and describe the numerous languages spoken by Native American communities.

Many of these languages were spoken by only a few people and were at risk of disappearing. As a result, American linguists faced an urgent need to record and analyze these languages before they were lost. To address this challenge, they developed specialized field methods and techniques, later referred to as "discovery procedures" by Noam Chomsky. These methods enabled linguists to study languages they did not speak or write.

**Franz Boas** found that these descriptions of the indigenous and exotic languages of North America had been distorted (corrupted) because linguists did not appreciate the diversity of the languages and they imposed the traditional grammatical categories of description upon languages for which they were inappropriate (grammatical rules). For Boas, every language has its own grammatical structure and it is the task of the linguist to discover for each language the categories of description appropriate to it, this view may be called Structuralism.

The two important figures in American linguistics after Boas are **Edward Sapir** and **Leonard Bloomfield.**

Sapir was influenced by Boas and turned to the study of the American Indian languages. Bloomfield wanted to make linguistics autonomous, independent and scientific. Sapir takes a more humanistic view of language as he lays great stress on its cultural importance. For him language is purely human and more instinctive. Sapir’s ***Language*** is easier to read than Bloomfield’s. There has never been a Sapirian school in the sense in which there has been a Bloomfieldian school of linguistics in America.

As Bloomfield understood the term scientific, it implied the rejection of all data that were not **directly observable or physically measurable**. Bloomfield was influenced by J.B. Watson’s behaviorist approach in psychology. According to Watson, the behavior of any organism was to be described and explained in terms of the organism’s responses to the stimulus represented by the features of the environment.

When Bloomfield came to write his book ***Language***, he adopted behaviourism in linguistic description. For him a certain stimulus causes someone to speak. For example, Jack and Jill are walking down a lane, Jill

sees an apple on a tree and being hungry asks Jack to get it for her. He climbs the tree and gives her the apple and she eats it. So, a behaviouristic description of this would be: “Jill’s being hungry that is some of her muscles were contracting and some fluids were being secreted especially in her stomach and her seeing the apple that is light waves reflected from the apple reached her eyes constitutes the stimulus. The more direct response to this stimulus would be for Jill to climb the tree and get the apple herself. Instead she makes a substitute response in the form of a particular sequence of noises with her speech organs and this acts as a substitute stimulus for Jack causing him to act as he might have done if he himself had been hungry and had seen the apple.

Bloomfield’s commitment to behaviourism had no appreciable effect upon syntax or phonology. For him the analysis of meaning was “the weak point in language study.”

**The grammatical analysis of sentences:**

**I-Immediate Constituent Analysis (ICA):** This term was introduced by Bloomfield who illustrated the way in which it was possible to take a sentence. He chose *“poor John ran away”* and split it up into two immediate constituents “*poor John*” and “*ran away*”. This being in turn divisible and analyzable into further constituents as *poor*+ *John*+ *ran*+ *away*. In other words, the sentence is seen not as a sequence of elements but as being made up of layers of constituents, each mode in the diagram being given an identifying label or name. This was made clear in the form of a tree diagram.

**A tree diagram:**

**Sentence**

**Subject Predicate**

**Adjective Noun Verb Particle**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Poor** |  | **John** | **ran** | **Away** |
| **Poor** | **John** |  | **ran** | **Away** |

**Adjective Noun Verb Particle**

**Subject Predicate**

**Sentence**

The techniques of I.C.A which were developed by Bloomfield and his followers such as Zellig Harris were precise; new information was accumulated about the way in which small sentences could be expanded to infinite lengths following certain procedures. E.g. “Buns taste nice”.

\*Those delightful buns you bought taste nice.

\*Not quite all those delightful current buns you bought the other day from that shop in the corner taste nice.

1. **Limitations of I.C.A:**
   1. It is not always clear where the cut between constituents is to come.

E.g. *that nice, efficient, old fashioned secretary is here*.

After the first cut between secretary and is, what should we do?

1. Should the noun phrase be divided into that and *nice efficient*, *old*-*fashioned secretary*.
2. Or into *that nice*, *efficient*, *old*-*fashioned* and *secretary*?
3. Or should we take out *that* and *secretary* together producing a discontinuous constituent and leaving the adjectives?
4. Or should we cut into three instead of two?

**Subject**

That adjectives secretary

Nice efficient old-fashioned

* 1. I.C.A cannot clarify the relationship between active and passive sentences.

E.g. sentence (a): that man saw John’s mother.

Sentence (b): John’s mother was seen by that man.

I.C.A would suggest an analysis for sentence (a) and another analysis for sentence (b), but how it tells us that the two sentences are related and that they mean the same thing.

I.C.A cannot provide this information. Similar examples in grammar to the active voice and passive one would be the relationship between negative and positive sentences, between statements and questions.

* 1. Grammatical analyses of sentences were made without reference to meaning, utterances were made without reference to meaning, utterances were analyzed on the basis of their formal properties and structure, and their meaning was not given a systematic place in the study.

5-I.C.A cannot clarify ambiguities, Chomsky proposes this example: *The police were ordered to stop drinking about midnight”*. This sentence is ambiguous in four ways:

* + 1. Was the drinking taking place at midnight or the ordering?
    2. Who was drinking? The police or someone else?

This sentence is ambiguous because it has more than one interpretation. In this case, I.C.A presents one meaning of the sentence only and ignores the other or it leaves us with the sentence analysis which was still ambiguous.