

Unit 3: American Structuralism

Introduction

It is agreed upon that the American linguistic studies emerged from the institutes of anthropology rather than from the institutes of languages. The American scholars were anthropologists who developed structural ideas far away from European work. They worked on existing languages, the **Amerindian** languages. Field work techniques of anthropologists characterized their approach. These languages did not have written records or previous descriptions as opposed to the European languages. Therefore, their historical aspects were discarded. The Amerindian languages were very different from the European ones. Thus, American structuralists, avoiding the prescriptive attitude, were in need to develop fresh descriptive frameworks fitting these languages' actual features. American work emphasised the uniqueness of each language's structure, similar to the European tradition. The leading figures of the American structural studies were **Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Leonard Bloomfield.**

1. Features of American Structuralism

In order to avoid the dangers implicit in traditional grammar, American linguists had the following aims:

- To describe current spoken language, not dead languages.
- To focus on language form as a sole objective, thus neglecting meaning to a subordinate place.
- To perform the description of language using an organized, unprejudiced and meticulous method which allows the analyst to extract the grammar of a language from a corpus of recorded data in a quasi- mechanical way following four steps:

a) Field recordings of a corpus of data

b) Segmentation of the utterances of the corpus at different levels: phoneme, morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence.

c) Listing an inventory of forms thus obtained from each level and stating the distribution (possible environment) of the forms.

d) Classifying the forms (by giving them names) and utterances of the language being studied.

Only such an essentially classificatory method could enable them, it was thought, to concentrate systematically without any predetermined framework, on the unique structure of the language under examination.

2. American Structuralists:

a. Edward Sapir 1884-1939

Edward Sapir was one of the students of Franz Boas. He was himself an anthropologist and a linguist at the same time. His important publication was his book *Language* (1921). Adopting a descriptive approach, he studied, together with Boas, a number of Amerindian disappearing languages. By and large, Sapir's approach to language was based on the exploration of the relations with literature, music, anthropology and psychology. His outlooks on language insist on its impact on every part of human life.

Sapir is well-known for a theory called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (also relativity, determinism, Humboldtism, or Whorfian Hypothesis). Developed after his death in the 1950s, it was the product of the beliefs of both Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897- 1941) on the relationship of language to thought. According to the strong version of the theory, our vision of the world is heavily determined by our language: the grammatical structures of a language shape its speakers' perception of the world. Much criticism was levelled at the Sapir and Whorf hypothesis; for example, translating between languages is possible, and this process does not impose a change in world view. On that basis, a weaker version of the hypothesis appeared, stating that language influences thought.

b. Leonard Bloomfield 1887-1949

Leonard Bloomfield is the father of modern American linguistics. His masterpiece in linguistic studies *Language* (1933), established the track of the scientific study of language in the United States till the early 1950s. Crucial in Bloomfield's work was his influence by behaviouristic psychology, which rejects all that is non-physical or non-observable in search of being empiricist

in approach. He conceived of language basically as couples of stimuli and responses. Bloomfield maintained that language should be studied like a natural science. Most importantly, he made influential contributions to the development of vigorous tools for the analysis of language.

Immediate Constituent Analysis

In addition to his remarkable contribution to the fields of phonology and morphology, Bloomfield's name is usually attached to a pioneering **syntactic theory** called **immediate constituent analysis** (ICA). Basically, ICA is an explicit method of analysing sentences grammatically by dividing them into their component parts. It is structural in nature because it no longer considers a sentence as a sequence or string of isolated elements, but it is made up of **layers** of groups or constituents. A **constituent** is a group of words or morphemes with closer relationships between one another than between the elements of the other groups or constituents within the same sentence. The constituent is part of a larger unit.

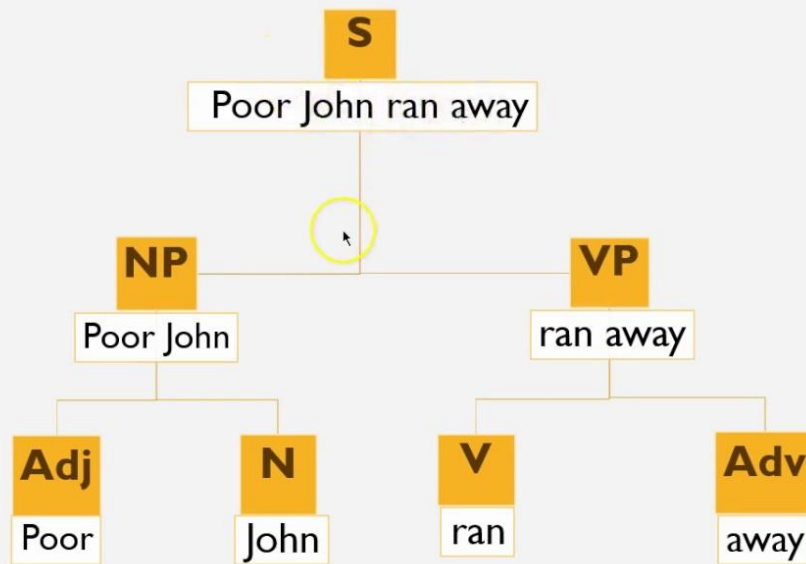
The methodology of ICA consists in **splitting** a sentence up into two **immediate constituents**, which are analysable into further constituents. This process of segmentation continues until the smallest indivisible units, the morphemes, are reached. The latter are called the ultimate constituents, and each is given an identifying label. As a principle, the partition in ICA is binary. The Bloomfield's classical example "Poor John ran away".

Tree diagram

1. Bracketing

[[[poor] [John]] [[ran] [away]]]

For example :



Weaknesses of the ICA

In spite of its popularity and scientific rigour, ICA was shown to involve inherent limitations because as a model of language description, its descriptive framework did not cover all the aspects of language that constitute the knowledge of a native speaker, and it contained some analytical inconsistencies. The main weaknesses for which this analysis is reprimanded are the following:

- In some sentences, it is not always clear where the division should be.
- ICA does not indicate the role or function of constituents as they are not labelled. When parsing is done, some implied grammatical information is included (circularity of argument).
- In ICA division is arbitrarily binary, while some sentences may have alternative analyses.
- The analysis in ICA does not go beyond the morpheme.
- Because it focuses only on the surface of the sentence (formal properties), ICA cannot show the syntactic relationship between sentences which are superficially different (active/passive, positive/negative) and fails to show the differences between sentences which are superficially similar.
- ICA cannot handle lexical and syntactic ambiguity in the sentence.
- ICA does not demonstrate how to form new sentences.

h) ICA cannot handle sentences with discontinuous elements.

i) ICA cannot handle complex sentences.

c. Franz Boas 1859-1942

Boas was the leading figure in anthropological work in early 20th century. Interested in describing the Amerindian cultures, particularly American Northwest ones. Boas focused on languages because they represented the best channel for classifying the aboriginal cultures. He objected to the use of grammatical categories of the Indo-European languages in describing Native American languages. For him, such a tradition would distort the features of these languages. The most important publication of Franz Boas was the Handbook of American Indian Languages (1911–1941).