

Chapter 3

The Descriptivist

Book Name : Schools of Linguistics

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- At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century when Saussure was working out his ideas in Europe, synchronic linguistics was emerging independently, and in a very different style, in America under the leadership of the anthropologist Franz Boas.
- It turned out to be enormously fruitful, which was never disputed until Noam Chomsky appeared on the scene in the late 1950s.
- We call the school founded by Boas by the term " Descriptivist".
- It is better we know that the great majority of synchronic linguists have been Americans.

The key to Boas' thought lay in the realization.

Language came to seem especially important to Boas. This was not only because language was the key to the other aspects of culture, but because people are normally unconscious of the principles on which their language operates, while when it comes to the other aspects of their culture.

What made Boas not just as an isolated scholar interested in language but the founder of a large and productive school of linguistic research was his work as organizer ...

His book " Handbook of American Indian Languages" was published in 1911.

Boas's introduction to it contains what is still a good summary of the Descriptivist approach to language. Several of the chapters on individual languages were written by Boas , and he trained the men who investigated the other languages, for decades subsequently , all the great names of American linguistics learned their subject from Boas at first or second hand.

Differences between the Boasian and Saussurean traditions:

- Saussure had seized the attention by inventing a new way of looking at phenomena which had seen so familiar...
- He illustrated his theoretical discussion by reference to his own tongue, French and to the other widely spoken European languages
- The interest in what Saussure said lay in his abstract conceptual analysis rather than in the facts to which the analysis applied.
- The idea of treating the sounds of a language as a system of phonemes.

And :

- Boas and his colleagues , on the other hand, were faced with the practical problem of working out what the current structure of various languages was like. They had no need

to worry about being misled by history, since neither they nor the speakers of these languages knew anything about the route by which the languages had reached their current state.

Descriptivist tended to think of abstract linguistic theorizing as a means to the end of successful practical description of particular languages rather than (as Chomsky does) thinking of individual languages as sources of data for the construction of a general theory of language.

A characteristic of the school founded by Boas was its relativism.

There was no ideal type of language, to which actual languages approximated more or less closely, human languages were endlessly divers.

Saussure was arguing that a language imposes an arbitrary structuring on the intrinsically unstructured domains of sound and meaning , Boas showed how this phenomenon produces a false appearance of primitiveness in languages which are in fact fully comparable with our own.

Thus , it was often felt in the 19th century that while European languages used definite ranges of fixed sounds corresponding fairly consistently with the letters of the alphabet, the sounds of primitive languages were variable so that a given word would be pronounced with this sound.

What is true of sound systems is just as true of the syntactic and semantic aspects of language.

Two points are often claimed to be characteristic of primitive languages.

On the one hand they are said to be vague, thus , many languages fail to distinguish singular from plural.

On the other hand , they are claimed to deal only in the concrete and not to tolerate the formation of abstract concepts.

For instance in Kwakiutl (a language of British Columbia studied by Boas) a noun can occur only with an inflexion indicating the possessor , so that one can speak of my love or his love but not of love as a general phenomenon.

Bloomfield took up the study of American Indian languages of the Algonquian family, and of certain languages of the Philippine Islands, and he also wrote at length on general synchronic linguistic theory.

The main point of Bloomfield's theories of language description can already be found in Boas, though they are often stated more explicitly and with more elaboration by Bloomfield.

What was new in Bloomfield was a philosophically sophisticated emphasis on the status of linguistics as a science.

From internet :

Positivism is a philosophical theory stating that positive knowledge is based on natural phenomena and their properties and relations. Thus, information derived from sensory experience, interpreted through reason and logic, forms the exclusive source of all authoritative knowledge. Positivism holds that valid knowledge (certitude or truth) is found only in this derived knowledge.

Logical positivism, also called logical empiricism, a philosophical movement that arose in

Vienna in the 1920s and was characterized by the view that scientific knowledge is the only kind of factual knowledge and that all traditional metaphysical doctrines are to be rejected as meaningless.

Return to book :

Bloomfield 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.

It will be obvious that positivism was wholly incompatible with notions such as collective mind on which the view of linguistics as sociology seems to depend. For Bloomfield linguistics was a branch of psychology and specifically of the positivistic brand of psychology known as behaviorism.

Bloomfield's theorizing about language was heavily behavioristic.

As it is said :

There is a good side and a bad side to behaviorism. In its good aspect, behaviorism is a principle of scientific method, a rule which says that the only things that may be used to confirm or refute a scientific theory are interpersonally observable phenomenon.

In semantics, Bloomfield's reasoning led him to conclude that the statement of meanings was in practice impossible, and would remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state.

As Descriptivist tended to react that linguistic analysis was a matter not of discovering structure that existed independently of linguists , researches, but rather of inventing structure which the linguist imposed on the language under study...

The Descriptivist thought of general linguistics more as a body of techniques of description than as a body of beliefs about the nature of language.

Consider , for instance, the alternative approaches to morphological and syntactic description christened by Charles Hockett (1954) the item and arrangement and the item and process models.