

American linguistics in the 1950's

Bloomfieldian Structuralism

- 1- General principles of structuralism
- 2- Specific features of American Structuralism
 - a- influence of behaviourist psychology
 - b- study procedures
 - c- focus on American indian languages
 - d- corpus-based analyses
 - e- descriptive (taxonomic) linguistics
- 3- Criticism of American Structuralism

1- General principles of structuralism

- American linguists, like their contemporaries in Europe, were all influenced by the structuralist views of Saussure. It had become evident among linguists that:
 - Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive.
 - Spoken language should also be studied.
 - Language is structured and self-contained.
 - Language is a system (of signs)
 - Relation between form and meaning is arbitrary.
 - Study of languages is synchronic.

Specific features of American Structuralism

a- influence of behaviourist psychology

b- study procedures

c- focus on American indian languages

d- corpus-based analyses

e- descriptive (taxonomic) linguistics

influence of behaviourist psychology

- Strong empiricist view:
 - All knowledge comes from experience
- Therefore:
 - Human behaviour is learned from the environment
 - We can only study what we can observe
 - We cannot observe the mind, so we must assume that it does not exist
 - We can observe the environment and behaviour, so let's assume this is all that exists
- Behaviourism was the only school of psychology to define away its subject matter

Specific features of American Structuralism

- a- influence of behaviourist psychology
- b- Empiricist approach to language study and study procedures
- d- focus on American indian languages
- e- corpus-based analyses
- f- descriptive (taxonomic) linguistics

Specific features of American Structuralism

b- Empiricist approach to language study

- American structural linguists believed that the only acceptable 'general principles' were **inductive generalizations** based on corpus of descriptions
- They relied on extensive fieldwork, rigorous objective analytical procedures, conclusions and generalisations
- They rejected explanations

Observation → Patterns → Tentative Hypothesis → Theory

Specific features of American Structuralism

b- Study procedures

- The procedures to determine the units in language should be objective and rigorous.
- In this respect, they provide two observable criteria for defining the items of language: Form and Distribution.
- ICA
- the method for ‘morpheme alternants’ (Harris 1942): “every sequence of phonemes which has meaning & which is not composed of smaller sequences having meaning is a morpheme”
- e.g. *knife-knives* /naiF/- a morphoph. symbol /F/ is an abbreviation for a set of alternating phonemes and for the alternation itself: *phoneme /v/ before plural /z/, phoneme /f/ elsewhere* (parallel to morphophonemes posited by Trubetzkoy)

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Specific features of American Structuralism

c- focus on American indian languages

- There were not many native Americans left by 1900 and their languages were disappearing fast
- There was therefore an urgent need to record their grammars
- American languages were very different from Indo-European languages and it was thought that classical linguistic concepts did not apply

Specific features of American Structuralism

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Specific features of American Structuralism

d- corpus-based analyses

American structural linguists were used to gather huge amounts of data about American native languages, these formed language corpora (corpus), on which they applied strict discovery procedures.

The analysed corpus enabled the linguists to make specific hypotheses about the language structure which are generalised to become accepted theories.

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Specific features of American Structuralism

e- descriptive (taxonomic) linguistics

- American structuralism → descriptivism
- Linguistics had to be purely descriptive, providing lists of structures of individual languages.
- It also attempted to provide classifications of language units of those languages.
- No explanation on language forms and their relationships were provided. This is why American structural linguistics was said to be taxonomic.

Conclusion

Features of American structuralism (descriptivism)

	features	criticism
philosophy	Behaviourism	innate language faculties The mind can be studied
Mode of enquiry	Empiricism	Some knowlge comes from the mind
Methods of analysis	Study procedures	Unable to cope with the complex faatures of language
Kind of data	Corpus-based	Unsufficient and skewed
Reuslt of enquiry	Language descriptions Taxonomic linguistics	Do not generate weel formed sentences
Language targets	American Indian languages Remoteness/ differences	Focus on a limited number languages is sufficient Universals/ similarities

Criticism of study procedures

1- Discontinuous elements

Is John coming?

2- Relationship between sentences

Dad fixed the car..... The car was fixed by dad

3- pair of sentence (same structure/ different meaning)

a- John expected the doctor to examine Helen.

b- John compelled the doctor to examine Helen.

c- John expected Helen to be examined by the doctor.

Criticism of study procedures

- Syntactic ambiguity
 - John washed the car in the garage
 - The children are ready to eat

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