

Mrs A.Abdessemed

**American Structuralism****(part 1)**

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The term structuralism was used in many contexts across various disciplines in the 20<sup>th</sup> century like history, philosophy, archeology, sociology and anthropology. It originates from the basic concept that all phenomena occur in relation to each other, not independently, and that all phenomena are part of a whole with a definite structure.

In linguistics, structuralism is based on the concept that language is a structured system of formal units, and linguistic study should involve exploring the nature of those units and their systematic arrangement, without reference to historical antecedents or comparison with other languages.

American structuralism generally refers to the study of structural linguistics in North America from the 1920s to late 1950s.

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.

A considerable amount of American structuralist research focused on indigenous languages of the Americas. It involved the study of Native American languages.. Since it was an unexplored area, linguists had to determine their rules and grammar structures first, before describing these languages patterns and comparing them with English

In order to understand the beginnings of this field study , let us have a look into the biography of the first considered to be founder of American structuralism.

**Franz Uri Boas (1858-1942) :**

**He** Was born in Germany , and studied natural sciences there. As a student ,he was primarily interested in physics and geography and his training was in those areas rather than in linguistics or anthropology. In connection with geographic studies, though ,he became intersted in the possibility of an influence of climate on language, and it was this proposition in part that he was examining when he first did fieldwork with the Eskimo people in 1883 (as part of an expedition). Over the following years , he became familiar with a number of other people of the northwest coast of America. Fascinated with the culture and language of the indian tribes , he started to be interested in their study . He committed himself to encourage and participating ethnography of Indian tribes ,hence he became the father of American Anthropology, and won the name of « Papa Franz » among his students. A major concern for him was to obtain information on native American cultures ,which had been judged as indogenous and inferior by the western point of view, before they disappear.

Boas was one of the most prominent opponents of the then-popular ideologies of **scientific racism**.

His studies, convinced him of the sophistication of native cultures, in contrast to western estimates and so rejected the idea of indigenous cultures as « inferior » stages along the route 'to civilized western cultures'. His work is associated with the two movements known as **historical particularism** (*Historical particularism is widely considered the first American anthropological school of thought. . It argued that each society is a collective representation of its unique historical past*) and **cultural relativism**.

This latter, holds that, beliefs values and practices should be based on that person's own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another ». Cultures cannot be objectively evaluated as higher or lower, better or worse, right or wrong, but all humans see the world through the lens of their own culture. So « cultural relativist » idea is :

cultures can only be judged on their own terms, and the job of an anthropologist is to understand how cultures work not to make aesthetic or moral judgements. According to him « All cultures were essentially equal, but simply had to be understood in their own terms. No culture was more or less developed or advanced than any other. They were simply **different** ».

In order to understand the culture, one needs to use its relative language. Language for him provided with « a window on the mind »<sup>1</sup>. As such. He developed for his analysis a model that stressed the linguistic transmission of myths. The Indian culture must be understood through the Indian language. The notion of « **inner form** » became core of Boas' view of ethnology and linguistics.

Amerindian languages cannot be described basing on the categories used to describe European languages. He objected 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. His theory is known as **Linguistic Relativity**, consistent with his **cultural relativism**, Boas believed that each language should be studied on its own terms rather than according to some preset categories based on the study of other, genetically unrelated languages (eg Latin) i.e avoiding *Generalization*. (Amerindian languages cannot be described basing on the categories used to describe European languages).

Boas' point was that each language should be studied in its own terms rather than examined only through the optic of some other system, defending the « Individual features of language ». His insistence on the previous approach, would become the basis for the characteristic of later American Structuralism « languages could differ from each other without limits and in unpredictable ways ». An unexplored area yet, linguists had to determine their rules and grammar structures first, before describing these languages patterns and comparing them with English. With his fellow, they started recording the speech of different tribes for later analyses and succeeded to collect significant data on a number of now extinct languages for example, Lower Chinook, Cathlamet, Chemkum...etc.

*The Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911) marks a turning point in the study of linguistics in America, and methods Boas and his followers worked out for the description of Amerindian Languages became the basis of American Structuralism.

To conclude, Boas took up linguistic work originally as a necessary tool for the investigation of culture, language being a particularly revealing aspect of culture. Language for him provided a « window on the mind » whose special virtue is the largely unconscious character of the knowledge it represents.

**1-Note** : The idea was **first** clearly expressed by 19th-century thinkers such as **Wilhelm von Humboldt**, who saw language as the expression of the spirit of a nation.