Edward Sapir and his contribution to linguistics

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Among the anthropologists trained by Franz Boas in the early decades of the twentieth century Edward Sapir alone was regularly acknowledged by his peers as a genius. The only professionally trained linguist among Boas's students, and gifted with intuitive insight into grammatical patterning and historical relationships of linguistic families, Sapir contributed seminally to general linguistic theory, Amerindian linguistics, and Indo-European linguistics. He also made important anthropological contributions in ethnology, culture theory, and cultural psychology. A prolific fieldworker as well as theorist, Sapir recorded for posterity thirty-nine different Amerindian languages, often working with the last living speaker. Alongside his linguistic investigations he gathered ethnographic information and transcribed indigenous-language folklore texts. He was a humanist as well as linguist and anthropologist, composing music and publishing poetry and literary criticism. For his successors in a range of disciplines he continues to exemplify the study of meaning and expressive form across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Although Sapir was born in Lauenberg, Pomerania (Prussia), in what is now Eebork, Poland, his parents, Jacob David and Eva Seagal Sapir, were Lithuanian
Jews. Sapir undoubtedly learned German as a child, but the language of his home was Yiddish; he read Hebrew with his father, a cantor, beginning when he was seven or eight. Jacob Sapir preferred music to theology, however, and the family's daily life was not intensely orthodox in religious observance.

When Sapir was fourteen he won a Pulitzer scholarship for four years at the prestigious Horace Mann High School. He declined it in favor of a local high school and used the scholarship for his undergraduate education at Columbia University. He was one of the bright stars among the immigrant children of the city, and higher education was his prize.

Entering Columbia in 1901. Sapir concentrated on Germanic philology while gaining formal training in Indo-European linguistics. He received his B.A. in German in 1904, having taken only three years to complete the four-year program. In 1905 he received his M.A., also in German. The transition from Germanics to anthropology was a smooth one. Sapir's M.A. thesis on Herder's theory of the origin of language, by including Eskimo examples, already reflected the influence of Boas.

**PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT**

Sapir's first professional appointment, in 1907, was as a research assistant at the University of California, Berkeley, where fellow Boas student Alfred Kroeber had a mandate to map the enormous cultural and linguistic diversity of the state. In a single year Sapir studied three dialects of Yana and worked briefly on Kato. Sapir moved to the University of Pennsylvania in 1908 to take up a Harrison fellowship, which involved teaching as well as research through the University Museum. With his ethnologist colleague Frank Speck, another former Boas student, Sapir worked on Catawba.

The Canadian work was interrupted only once, when Kroeber invited Sapir back to California to work with a "wild" Indian, the last speaker of Yahi, a Yana language. Using his knowledge of other Yana varieties studied years before, Sapir spent the summer of 1915 recording Ishi's unique knowledge of his language and culture.
The later Ottawa years were depressing ones, on personal as well as professional grounds. Sapir was a pacifist during the First World War and keenly felt his position as an immigrant to North America. In 1925 Sapir was called to the University of Chicago, which had already assembled a stellar faculty. His appointment was to a joint Department of Sociology and Anthropology, which split in 1929. Since the "Chicago School" of sociology was the most prestigious and professional variety of social science in North America at the time, the new position placed Sapir at the center of a network of interdisciplinary scholarship, much of it sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. After the years of perceived isolation in Ottawa, Sapir thrived on the intellectual excitement of Chicago in the late 1920s. He eagerly joined the interdisciplinary conference circuit, becoming the man of words who enabled colleagues from sociology and psychology/psychiatry to understand the common links of their work. His collaboration with interactional psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan and political scientist Harold D. Lasswell is particularly notable.

In 1931 Sapir followed Rockefeller funding to Yale University. As Sterling professor of anthropology and linguistics he was expected to bring interdisciplinary research to the Graduate Division of the university, heading a new department of anthropology and drawing social science research together into a single coherent research program. With colleagues at the Institute of Human Relations he was to offer a seminar on "the impact of culture on personality," supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. He was also to serve in a newly independent graduate department of linguistics. In 1937, while teaching at the Linguistic Society of America Summer Institute at Ann Arbor, Michigan, Sapir suffered his first heart attack.

LINGUISTIC METHOD AND THEORY

Sapir's first synthetic works were part of the formalization of the Boasian paradigm. In 1916 his Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture: A Study in Method laid out the method of historical inference implicit in the Boasian reconstruction of the history of cultures and languages. (At the time, direct
archaeological evidence of American prehistory was scanty, and there were no consistent standards for its interpretation until the Pecos Conference a full decade later; indirect evidence, such as might be provided by linguistics and ethnology, was therefore crucial.) Drawing on linguistic examples from a remarkable range of cases, Sapir in Time Perspective distinguished methodologically between the properties of language and culture for historical reconstruction. Sound change in language, unlike the other parts of culture, he argued, retained traces of the past historical relationships of languages. In consequence, genetic relationships could be discerned and distinguished from other kinds of relationships by the application of methods used in Indo-European historical linguistics, even in the absence of written records. Sapir's treatise remained the ethnologist's guide to historical method for a generation and still repays careful attention to the forms of his logic. In 1921 Sapir published Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech, the only book he completed during his lifetime. He included written and unwritten languages on an equal footing, marvelling at the precision and beauty of grammatical forms and structural typologies. This was Sapir the linguist writing at his most lyrical and persuasive. The book was directed at an educated general audience, but its broad canvas and penetrating vision of linguistic form, as well as its treatment of specific topics, have greatly influenced professional linguists ever since. The discussion of "drift," for example, remains fundamental to linguistic theory about processes of language change. Also in 1921 Sapir published a one-page summary of his six-unit classification of American Indian languages, based on a paper read to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Although the 1929 version of this classification is better known and is accompanied by considerable justification, including a medial classification of twenty-three units acceptable even to conservatives among Amerindian linguists, the 1921 version was essentially complete. It was based on the comparative work Sapir and his colleagues had done over the past two decades. Although Sapir himself saw the classification as a series of working hypotheses,
many anthropologists promptly reified its categories, latching onto the six-unit classification as an easy guide to tribal relationships.

The most daring of the proposals made by Sapir in this period involved linking Athabaskan to Haida and Tlingit to form Na-dene and then linking Na-dene, largely on the basis of its tonal structure, to Sino-Tibetan. By the 1930's, however, when Sapir moved to Yale, his colleagues in linguistics were skeptical of such speculative large-scale genetic hypotheses, and the anthropologists were no longer in dire need of historical models from linguistics (if only because of the emergence of reliable dating methods in prehistoric archaeology). During the Yale years Sapir paid less attention to the six-unit classification, returning instead to linguistic theory and to specific linguistic problems both within and beyond the Americanist field, including studies in African, Semitic, and Indo-European linguistics.

Some of Sapir's most famous contributions to linguistic theory lie in phonology, the study of sound systems. In 1925 the inaugural issue of Language--the journal of the Linguistic Society of America, of which Sapir was a crucial founder--carried his paper, "Sound Patterns in Language," which defined the concept of the phoneme in terms of significant relationships among sounds, rather than their objective qualities. In 1933 he followed up this pattern-oriented argument in discussing the phoneme's "psychological reality." that is, the intuitions of Amerindian language speakers for their native language's phonological system. The level of generalization implicit in Sapir's distinction between phonetics and phonology in these papers, which revolutionized American linguistics, was derived from fieldwork with aboriginal languages independently of parallel work on phonemic models by the Prague School of linguists in Europe. A late (1938) paper of Sapir's on glottalized continuants pursued these phonological themes and is significant for its use of evidence from Amerindian languages alongside Indo-European data.

Sapir is also especially noted for his dynamic conception of grammar. His analysis of the grammar of Southern Paiute, together with his student Stanley Newman's grammar of Yokuts, stand as exemplars of the "process grammar," an important
though discontinuous precursor of contemporary generative theories. What intervened was the school of linguistics associated with Leonard Bloomfield, Sapir's younger colleague at Yale. Sapir's conception of grammatical process and his interest in the study of meaning as integral to the theory of grammar contrast sharply with the work of the Bloomfieldians.

Sapir's discussions of the role of meaning in grammatical form and the relationships of these to the use of language in formulating and conveying ideas have been taken as his contribution to what is often called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In fact the hypothesis was developed largely by his student Benjamin Lee Whorf after his mentor's death. But there are certainly intimations in Sapir's own writing of the way in which habitual thought might be influenced, if not determined, by linguistic structures.

There is almost no important topic in linguistics or its allied disciplines to which Sapir did not contribute. Some of his interests, it is true, no longer command widespread scholarly attention, such as the construction of an international language. Others, such as his work on sociolinguistic variation in Yana, have been rediscovered by modern scholars who emphasize these topics more than Sapir himself did. Taken as a whole, however, the range of Sapir's concerns significantly shaped the outlines of American linguistics for later generations.
References.


- Sapir, Edward, 1925. Sound Patterns in Language. Language 1, 37-51.
