

Katherine Oak Stevenson

Dr. Jon W. Carroll

AN4391

12/09/2021

The Origins and Evolution of Linguistic Anthropology

An ongoing theoretical question in anthropology concerns how language is developed, adapted, transmitted, and utilized across cultures. One of the first theoreticians to explore how language might correlate with culture was Ferdinand de Saussure (Erickson and Murphy 2017:63), whose theories around signs and signifiers went on to form the basis of linguistic anthropology as well as influence the development of French Structuralist Anthropology (Erickson and Murphy 2017:92). Continuing and expanding on this work, Franz Boas applied (Erickson and Murphy 2017:63) de Saussure's theories to American anthropology, ultimately contributing to a legacy of language studies that recognize how cultural change and adaptation develop differences in meaning over time (Erickson and Murphy 2017:64). That legacy was picked up in the works of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf (Erickson and Murphy 2017:109), as well as more contemporary postmodern theoretical frameworks (Erickson and Murphy 2017:165).

De Saussure and Structuralism

Background and Influences. Despite an obvious facility for language, Ferdinand de Saussure began his studies in physics and chemistry before refocusing on language and gaining his doctorate in historical linguistics (Erickson and Murphy 2017:59). Perhaps because of his own personal experiences living in the somewhat multicultural region of Switzerland and speaking several languages, he developed a keen interest in defining synchronous units of

language (Erickson and Murphy 2017:59). This was in direct contrast to the cultural evolutionists at the time who were studying language from a diachronous perspective, seeking to develop a family tree of sorts that would track the development of language throughout time (Erickson and Murphy 2017:59). His desire to understand language on a more systematic level was a deep departure from his training as a historical linguist (Erickson and Murphy 2017:59).

Linguistic Theory. In his pursuit to define what language is, de Saussure took a very word-focused approach (Agha 2007:233), seeking to define how a specific word correlates to an idea and a sound (Erickson and Murphy 2017:59). His semiotic theory centered on the definition of language as a compilation of signs that are combined in different ways to communicate ideas (Erickson and Murphy 2017:59). According to de Saussure, a sign is made up of a concept and a sound-image, which means that while it might relate to an audible sound, it does not have to be spoken in order for it to be imagined or connected to mentally by the speaker or thinker (de Saussure 2017[1916]:95). By breaking down the complexities of language into discrete units which may or may not correlate with each other, de Saussure provided a mechanism for studying both the internal communication of a culture as well as the universal, or cross cultural, contexts of communication (Agha 2007:220). While he believed that the association between sign and signifier was arbitrary in nature and that the sound-image for a concept often does not transcend different linguistic traditions (de Saussure 2017[1916]:96), he, like Boas, recognized that these linguistic units could only be understood within the larger context of a specific cultural system (Hill and Mannheim 1992:385). One major exception that de Saussure made in his theory that signs and signifiers are arbitrary is in the case of onomatopoeias, recognizing that the concept and the related sound are, in fact, correlated and representative of each other (de Saussure 2017[1916]:97). Another key element of de Saussure's approach to linguistic theory was to focus

on it in a synchronous manner, rejecting the study of its development over time in lieu of concentrating on how linguistic units related with each other (Erickson and Murphy 2017:62-64). These mechanisms were part of de Saussure's desire to develop a scientific approach to the study of language, whereby it could be measured more empirically, similar to other burgeoning social sciences (Manning 2006:271). In spite of—or perhaps in recognition of—this, de Saussure was also careful to question any perceived laws of language, encouraging those studying linguistics to be aware of any such assumptions (de Saussure 2017[1916]:97).

Legacy. de Saussure is often referenced as the forefather of modern linguistics, and his influence cannot be understated. Through Jakobson, who helped to develop the linguistic idea of binary opposites (Erickson and Murphy 2017:85), he influenced the development of French Structural Anthropology through Claude Lévi-Strauss (Erickson and Murphy 2017:83). Structuralism analyzes culture through the lens of oppositional ideas that function in concert with each other in order to determine what that culture might find meaningful (Erickson and Murphy 2017:83). The concept of binary opposites may have well found their roots in de Saussure's recognition that any linguistic unit is comprised of two interrelated sides, whether those be expressed in terms of sound or speech, synchronic or diachronic, individual or social, and that in order to truly understand how it correlates to other linguistic units or the context of the culture overall, both sides must be explored (Agha 2007:221). Not only did de Saussure lay the groundwork for linguistic anthropology in general, he provided a theoretical framework that would go on to inform other schools of thought, including the Boasians (Jakobson and Boas 1944:189).

Boasian Linguistics

Background and Influences. Franz Boas also began in the natural sciences, first studying physics before transitioning to anthropology, bringing with him a methodological approach rooted in empiricism (Erickson and Murphy 2017:65). He promoted the practice of field work as an essential component of anthropological study, in contrast to previous nineteenth century theoreticians who instead developed their ideas by comparing historical theory (Erickson and Murphy 2017:67). As an immigrant and as a Jew, Boas may have experienced alienation from mainstream American culture, similar to his students Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, which may have inspired his focus on participant-observer fieldwork and outsider data collection (Erickson and Murphy 2017:78, 80). Boas did not formally train in linguistic theory but instead became interested in it as a result of his own field work experiences (Briggs 2002:482).

Linguistic Theory. Boas embraced a diachronous perspective of linguistics, but not from the unilinear evolutionary perspective promoted by the cultural evolutionists of the nineteenth century (Briggs 2002:483). He also explored a diffusionist influence within and between languages of a specific region, as exemplified in some of his fieldwork on the *mexicano* dialect in Oaxaca, wherein he collected as much data on the dialect from native speakers and then compared linguistic differences across several communities throughout the region (Boas and Beck 2017[1917]). While he did not draw any specific conclusions in this work, his detailed data collection might serve as the basis for understanding cultural and linguistic migration and diffusion across seemingly invisible boundaries (Bashkow 2004:445). Overall, Boas viewed linguistics as a method of understanding a particular culture on their own terms, without the muddying influence of translators or interpreters, or even cultural representatives who adapted to meet the perceived needs of the anthropologist (Briggs 2002:483). Since Boas viewed culture itself as a mental construct, he believed that language had the potential to shape perceptions of

reality at an unconscious level, unless linguistic structures were being actively studied (Boas 2017 [1920]:119). Perhaps because of his background and focus as a social activist (Erickson and Murphy 2017:68), Boas was keen to separate culture, race, and language, attempting to understand the latter on an automatic or systemic level that adapts to cultural drivers such as developing detailed explanations to transmit the importance of cultural customs from parent to child in a meaningful way (Briggs 2002:484). While Boas' theory does share some commonalities and, indeed, is informed by de Saussure's work, he instead focused on cultural discourse and historical language—not from an evolutionary perspective, but in recognition of his diachronous approach to collecting and comparing data over time—and not the seemingly arbitrary correlation between sign and signifier (Agha 2007:229).

Legacy. Given Boas' founding influence on American anthropology, it should be no surprise that his ideas and theories around culture were integrated into the works of his students. Initially, we see his influence in the theory of Alfred Louis Kroeber, who recognizes culture as the unique domain of humans versus other animals, and the necessity of language and symbolism in the development, transmission, and adaptation of human culture over time (Kroeber 2017 [1923]:134-135). Edward Sapir went on to characterize Boasian linguistics in terms of linguistic relativity, in as much as the interplay between language and culture might vary on the surface, they might ultimately conform to universal truths over time (Hill and Mannheim 1992:383).

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Linguistic Relativity

Background and Influences. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, also referred to as linguistic relativity (Erickson and Murphy 2017:109), was developed by Franz Boas' student Edward Sapir in concert with Benjamin Lee Whorf (Erickson and Murphy 2017:109). Boas' observations that language is a construct that enables a shared cultural understanding (O'Neill 2015) influenced

Sapir's work as a budding anthropologist (O'Neill 2015) and he pursued extensive studies aimed at determining if and how language might shape cognition (O'Neill 2015). Sapir's theoretical work contributed to the development of cognitive anthropology (Erickson and Murphy 2017:108), especially his work on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Erickson and Murphy 2017:109). Benjamin Lee Whorf was a hobbyist who was interested in learning about how various indigenous languages compared to modern languages (Erickson and Murphy 2017:109) and he began studying and working with Sapir in order to further his studies (Erickson and Murphy 2017:109). Similar to French Structural Anthropology, both Sapir and Whorf rooted their work in the belief that culture is a mental construct, internally held within a person's mind (Erickson and Murphy 2017:109), and only through their unique language practices do they create, share, and discover new cultural meanings (Erickson and Murphy 2017:109).

Linguistic Theory. The basis of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is that the language that we use shapes the way that we interpret and engage with the world (O'Neill 2015, Hussein 2012:642). Through the use of a shared language, each culture is able to establish, share, and interpret a particular perspective on reality (O'Neill 2015), making language a key element in the creation, maintenance, and transmission of cultural practices over time (O'Neill 2015). While the concept of linguistic relativity has roots as far back as Aristotle (O'Neill 2015), Sapir delved further into parsing the idea as he focused on how specific phonemic practices in a language impart and imbue meaning (O'Neill 2015), and are passed down through generations as an artifact of culture (O'Neill 2015). Sapir proposed that the process of enculturation and learning one's native language inherently shaped cognitive development (O'Neill 2015) and contributed to how they perceive their culture's shared reality (O'Neill 2015). Whorf took these ideas further by noting that we use language to order the chaos of the natural world (O'Neill 2015) and that

the language that we develop and use to do so directly relates to the requirements of our environment (O'Neill 2015).

Legacy. Despite its root in antiquity, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and the principle of linguistic relativity is considered somewhat controversial (Pavlenko 2016:581, Hussein 2012:642). Given that the principle of linguistic relativity must include the very cognition and linguistic practices of scientists themselves (Pavlenko 2016:582), the concept that we are somehow able to objectively question, test, and determine the validity of linguistic relativity also requires interrogation (Pavlenko 2016:582). As an undercurrent of cognitive anthropology (Erickson and Murphy 2017:108), the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis gained traction in other social sciences, specifically psychology (Wolff and Holmes 2011:253, Hussein 2012:642), as well as influencing the theory around language studies (Ünal and Papafragou 2016:554). Specifically, the impact that language might have on nonlinguistic thought is under continued study (Ünal and Papafragou 2016:555) with the goal of understanding how our linguistic practices might shape the options that we perceive and conceive and, therefore, contribute to nonlinguistic decision making (Ünal and Papafragou 2016:555-556). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis continues to be explored and tested (Hussein 2012:645), sometimes using more explicit methods such as asking children of different linguistic backgrounds to categorize certain items and then extrapolating those findings to connect to larger cultural practices, habits, and constructs (Hussein 2012:645). A renewed interest in the theory of linguistic relativity has resulted in further revelations that support its basic conceit that language shapes how we perceive reality (Hussein 2012:642), including that cultures such as the Guugu Yimidhirr, who use more geopolitical methods of direction-giving and navigating versus more personal or ego-specific methods (O'Neill 2015), are more skilled than other test groups in recalling the spatial orientation of objects in the lab

(O'Neill 2015). Overall, the legacy of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is that it is a continued avenue of study and it is influencing modern language acquisition and linguistic theory (Pavlenko 2016:583, Hussein 2012:645).

Postmodernity's Language as a Lens

Background and Influences. The postmodern theoretical framework developed in the 1960s and 1970s as a direct response to shifts in the academy (Erickson and Murphy 2017:156). While much of anthropological theory up until that time had attempted to focus on an empirical approach to the field (Erickson and Murphy 2017:156), the result was that the discipline risked irrelevance (Erickson and Murphy 2017:156). The indelible impact of World War II on a global scale and the slow demise of the colonial approach to world building formed an undercurrent of interrogation (Erickson and Murphy 2017:156) that focused primarily on deconstructing the modern world and evaluating various cultural artifacts as subjective texts (Erickson and Murphy 2017:164-165). Practices rooted in Enlightenment Europe, such as the use of a narrowly empirical scientific method—an approach that even one the founders of the scientific method, Francis Bacon, warned against (Bizzell and Herzberg 2001:737)—were beginning to be considered as cultural artifacts worthy of study, analysis, and deconstruction themselves (Erickson and Murphy 2017:157). Accordingly, the previous focus on a seemingly testable, scientifically-based theoretical framework was fading (Erickson and Murphy 2017:157), and in its place, the realization that a multiplicity of perspectives are necessary to understand the complexity of culture (Erickson and Murphy 2017:157). We can see elements of Boas' historical particularism in the growing appreciation for relativity and subjectivity (Erickson and Murphy 2017:157).

Linguistic Theory. The underlying concept of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language is a lens (Ünal and Papafragou 2016:555) and the movement to interrogate the linguistic habits of scientists as a method of analyzing the cultural biases and lenses through which they are operating (Pavlenko 2016:582) forms the substructure of postmodern linguistic theory (Erickson and Murphy 2017:165). Through this process, thinkers such as Pierre Bordieu and Michel Foucault produced cultural analyses that explored the very language used to communicate certain ideas over time and how that shaped cultural perspectives of them (Erickson and Murphy 2017:159). This deconstructionist approach, rooted in a desire to interrogate presumptions and assumptions (Erickson and Murphy 2017:159), enabled a postmodern perspective that explored not only how and why we use certain types of language, but the porous interaction between cultural use and cultural behavior (Erickson and Murphy 2017:161).

Legacy. In his book *Language as Symbolic Action*, Kenneth Burke takes up the concept of postmodern linguistics in his identification of terministic screens (Burke 1966:45). Terministic screens are his version of the Sapir-Whorf linguistic lens (Burke 1966:45), in as much as the terms that we choose to use shape the world that we live in (Burke 1966:45). The postmodern theoretical approach of deconstruction enabled thinkers such as Burke to identify that the language we use to order our reality both allows for certain types of experiences and ideas and defends against others (Burke 1966:45). The postmodern undercurrent of deconstruction and interrogative analysis is influencing some modern theorists to propose a rhetorical turn in anthropology (Mokrzan 2014:1). This examination of the linguistic use of terminology and how that represents, shapes, and transforms all cultures, including the dominant Anglo-American perspective is shaped by postmodern linguistic theory (Mokrzan 2014:3). For example, studying the language use of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* provides insight into both

Darwin's cultural context as well as how the very words that he used infiltrated popular thought and scientific inquiry as a whole (Mokrzyan 2014:3). In postmodern linguistics, the general approach is to not only examine the ways in which language and perspective differ across cultures and how that might influence thought (Erickson and Murphy 2017:159) but to include in that examination the ways in which the scientist's own linguistic and cognitive processes might inform how they are processing that analysis (Erickson and Murphy 2017:161).

Conclusion

Ferdinand de Saussure began his explorations of how language and culture interact by discussing how sounds and symbols relate to each other in order to create and share meaning within a given cultural context. Franz Boas picked up his work and applied it to his fieldwork with the Inuit, recognizing that language is a unique cultural artifact that forms the basis for a culture's shared reality. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf went on to identify how these linguistic elements ultimately shape cognition and, therefore, individual and cultural perceptions of reality. As the field responded to world events and postmodernism influenced its theoretical frameworks, there is a movement toward taking the ideas of linguistic relativity and applying them more broadly. With thinkers such as Kenneth Burke exploring how the deconstruction of terminology can define a culture and their concepts of reality, we see further movement into a highly relative and subjective theoretical framework, which encourages not only deep interrogation of the field, it challenges it to set aside its preconceived notions of itself in the pursuit of a richer and more diverse epistemology.

References Cited

Agha, Asif

- 2007 The Object Called “Language” and the Subject of Linguistics. *Journal of English Linguistics* 35(3):217-235.

Bashkow, Ira

- 2001 A Neo-Boasian Conception of Cultural Boundaries. *American Anthropologist* 106(3):443-458.

Bizzell, Patricia and Bruce Herzberg.

- 2001 *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. 2nd ed. Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston MA.

Boas, Franz

- 2017 [1920] The Methods of Ethnology. In *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory*, edited by Paul A. Erikson and Liam D. Murphy, pp. 115-121. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Boas, Franz and David Beck

- 2017 [1917] The Mexicano (Nahuatl) Dialect of Pochutla, Oaxaca. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 83(2):365-442.

Briggs, Charles L.

- 2002 Linguistic Magic Bullets in the Making of Modernist Anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 104(2):481-498.

Burke, Kenneth

1966 Language as Symbolic Action. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London.

de Saussure, Ferdinand

2017 [1916] Nature of the Linguistic sign and Synchronic and Diachronic Law. In *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory*, edited by Paul A. Erikson and Liam D. Murphy, pp. 95-103. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Erikson, Paul A., and Liam D. Murphy

2017 *A History of Anthropological Theory*. 5th ed. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Hill, Jane H., and Bruce Mannheim

1992 Language and World View. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21:381-406.

Hussein, Basel Al-Sheikh

2012 The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Today. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 2(3):642-646

Jakobson, Roman and Franz Boaz

1944 Franz Boas' Approach to Language. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 10(4):188-195.

Kroeber, Alfred Louis

2017 [1923] What Anthropology is About. In *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory*, edited by Paul A. Erikson and Liam D. Murphy, pp. 130-139. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Manning, Paul

- 2006 Words and things, goods and services: Problems of translation between language and political economy. *Language & Communication* 26:270-284.

Mokrzan, Michał

- 2014 The Rhetorical Turn in Anthropology. *Český lid* 101:1-18

O'Neill, Sean P.

- 2015 Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. In *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*, edited by Karen Tracy. Wiley. https://search-credoreference-com.huaryu.kl.oakland.edu/content/entry/wileylasi/sapir_whorf_hypothesis/0, accessed December 9, 2021.

Pavlenko, Aneta

- 2016 Whorf's Lost Argument. *Language Learning* 66(3):581-607.

Ünal, Ercenur and Anna Papafragou

- 2016 Interactions Between Language and Mental Representations. *Language Learning* 66(3):554-580.

Wolff, Phillip and Kevin J. Holmes

- 2011 Linguistic Relativity. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*. 2.3:253-265.