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Leonard Bloomfield's View of Structuralism and Linguistics

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Abstract - Leonard Bloomfield is accused of neglecting the meaning of Language and focusing on its structural aspect only. The present paper is an attempt to clarify Bloomfield's understanding of linguistics. This is done by means of studying his views of structuralism and linguistics.

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Leonard Bloomfield's View of Structuralism and Linguistics

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I. INTRODUCTION

Some critics of linguistics seem, to my mind, to substitute "structural linguistics" (structuralism), which constitutes an essential part of the scientific study of language, for "linguistics" as a whole. This kind of an unforgivable sin can only result in the distortion of the field of linguistics, and in confusing the student of language. Therefore, the author wants his readers to consider this paper as a contribution to a better understanding of the terms "structuralism" and "linguistics".

To achieve this goal, the author sets out to show how complex linguistics can be. And this will be pursued by his correcting of the criticism of Leonard Bloomfield's conception of Language.

II. BLOOMFIELD'S CONCEPTION OF LANGUAGE

It is maintained - and indeed up to the present day - that Bloomfield practised linguistic analysis without wanting to consider psychological, sociological, semantic and other aspects.

In the following the author would like to deal with two points: on the one hand, I want to analyse Bloomfield's structuralistic attitude towards linguistics as a whole; on the other hand, I want to describe Bloomfield's special position in American Linguistics.

Regarding the first topic, Bloomfield's structuralistic attitude towards linguistics as whole has been misinterpreted. The author thinks one reason is that Bloomfield's critics did not perceive that fact that the original objective of the American Linguistics of the thirties, forties and fifties was the working out of methods for the description of Indian languages, threatened to become extinct, and which did not concern itself with putting forward a universal theory. This only became the function of modern linguistics.

In the mentioned period the American linguists pursued the aim of making language accessible to an inductive scientific analysis which should be examinable in an empirical way.

American linguistics differs essentially from de Saussure's structuralism since this underlies a deductive method. De Saussure influenced linguistics merely formally. This means, linguistic units are according to de Saussure - not determined on the level of parole as the concrete act of speaking, but on that of the "linguistic system" (the corresponding term in de Saussure is "langue").

If linguistics is understood in such a way, the pragmatic aspect of language as an object of analysis remains excluded. The reproaches made against Bloomfield should be actually made against de Saussure because he regards language completely described in the setting up of a grammar theory. According to Bloomfield, however, a theory is necessary for an adequate description of language; a theory which takes into account not only structural aspects but also other ones. Also E. Causerie does not restrict language analysis to structuralism, but he extends it to the following levels:

1. The level of language typology; on this level the classification of the natural languages is given on the basis of particular characteristics, for example because of the word structure, according to which the agglutinative, inflexional and polysynthetical linguistic structure could be stated;
2. The level of language norm; that means the investigation of the regulating system of a language. A regulating system which all members of a language community have at their disposal;
3. The level of language system; on this level the complex connection of function of linguistic elements from different levels is determined; and
4. The level of speech in the sense of parole, act of speech.

From my point of view Causerie is right in claiming that the structural language description only deals with the third level of the language system. Therefore, we can state that the criticism of structuralism and thus of Bloomfield's descriptivism (as it is called) saying that he ignored aspects such as psychological, semantic and sociological, was based on a very simplified conception of language. This means, such a kind of criticism does not understand structuralism as a

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part of linguistics, which explores language in all its relations, but it puts it on such a level.

Structuralism is better called "maicrolinguistics" and Linguistics "maicrolinguistics". Since the critics did not differentiate the functions of maicrolinguistics from those of macro linguistics, they expected from the structural and thus from Bloomfield's descriptive linguistics that what only linguistics is able to accomplish as maicrolinguistics. So Hudson criticizes in his book "Sociolinguistics" structuralism as incomplete because it neglected social problems. However, Bloomfield as a structural linguist, did not think, other than Hudson, of being able to deal with all aspects pertaining to a language in its entirety, but what on no account means that they are excluded. Despite this being so obvious, Bloomfield's Linguistics was interpreted as if he had pretended that he could tackle all problems of language. Thus, Bloomfield's critics failed to notice the fact that it is impossible to solve all problems only in the scope of structuralism; in order to overcome them it is much more necessary to cooperate with the other disciplines and take their results into consideration. Accordingly, in Bloomfield's conception neither the psychological nor any other aspect of language analysis is ruled out. So, Fries' assertion also that Bloomfield's position was to promote the autonomy of linguistics and thus to become independent of psychology, cannot be justified. On the contrary, however, it results from Bloomfield's attitude that psychology is indispensable in order to explain language processes.

To come to the second point: Bloomfield's position in American Linguistics has been misinterpreted. This can be attributed to the fact that the American linguistics in the period mentioned is described in a uniform and indiscriminate way. Looking at Bloomfield's linguistics more closely, however, one cannot ignore considerable differences between his contemporaries and followers, the so-called Bloomfieldians and himself. Under close consideration Bloomfield's conception of language would appear in a historic scientific as well as in a descriptive way. However, his pupils – being very different from each other – are chiefly working descriptively. This difference is very obvious in Bloomfield's papers as well as in his practical works. In this connection we can give remembrance of his "Postulates", edited in 1926, and his "Algonquian Investigations", edited in 1946. The former gives a clear notion of Bloomfield's idea of language analysis in the way of assumptions and definitions for a descriptive as well as for historical linguistics; assumptions and definitions which find its total expression in the latter, in the reconstruction of the Algonquian language family. Thus, Bloomfield makes clear – other than his pupils – that he tries not only to contribute a language description to linguistics; this means, he did not believe in achieving a complete

analysis of language only by a description of sounds and their combinations.

Bloomfield's Postulates and Algonquian Investigations make obvious that for an adequate description of language a descriptive as well as a historical explanation is necessary. The difference between Bloomfield and his pupils was his personal commitment in dealing with strange cultures. He was absolutely convinced of the fact that it was not sufficient to describe a foreign language by listing sounds and compare them with each other, but he insisted on the opinion that there had to be knowledge of the culture to be analysed in order to understand the meaning of language. Thus, Bloomfield establishes a connection between language and the non-linguistic world. By doing so, Language description was equally used for the form and the contents. However, his pupils – as Trager and Smith – termed culture as "metalinguistic", put it on the same level with "meaning" and thus, they did not take it into consideration.

Instead of reproaching the above mentioned persons of being antisemantic, Bloomfield is said to hold the position of refusing the "meaning" though he emphasized the importance of the semantic aspect in the analysis as well as in language description. However, it would be right to say there were advocates in the American Structural Linguistics who were in favour of a non - semantic approach to phonology and who supported the exclusion of "meaning" in the phonological description. Therefore, it is not right to consider American Linguistics as a whole and undifferentiated as Robins does in his book "A Short History of Linguistics" (1967); it is not correct because criticism would also include Bloomfield's linguistics. The accusation that Bloomfield wanted to exclude "meaning" as an aspect of language analysis can, indeed, be attributed to the lack of understanding of his use of the term "meaning". Bloomfield was aware of the fact that he – as a structural linguist – had not been able to deal with all aspects of the comprehensive term "meaning" in a complex language theory. He exactly differentiated the term "meaning" from the term "linguistic meaning", which says that the forms of language can be described by its characteristics, its order, phonetic modification, selection and by the inflection or the use of secondary phonemes.

The term "linguistic meaning", limited in such a way, and whose compounds can be acquired only by analyzing language, represents merely a part of the term "meaning", being more comprehensive in use, and which constitutes itself by adding non-linguistic factors. Bloomfield's definition of "meaning" and "linguistic meaning" referred thus to the versatility of a language analysis.

III. CONCLUSION

Concurring with J. Lyons, the author wants to conclude this paper by saying that the versatility of a language forces the linguist to limit his interest and to concentrate on a part of it. For there is no theoretic frame, and perhaps there will never be one, that could help us in considering language from the sociological, psychological, cultural and neurophysiologic aspect at the same time. This fact, however, requires all linguists to cooperate with other disciplines and to take their results into consideration, if the study of linguistics is to be more fruitful.

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