

Phase III: Modern Linguistics

SLT 2016
Lecture 9

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857- 1913)

Language - a
social system
of Signs



- Linguistics in the 19th century expanded our knowledge in highly specialised areas, such as phonetics and phonology, historical and comparative studies, etc..
- Ferdinand de Saussure looked beyond the ‘bits and pieces’ of language; he saw language as an integrated complex structure of arbitrary symbols (Linguistic Signs), and tried to uncover the underlying structure that ‘makes it tick’ – the mechanism of Language.

Saussure (1857-1913) on Language Dualities:

- 1. Phonetic duality** (sound perception /sound articulation)
- 2. But is language just speech sounds?**
 - A sound, itself a complex auditory-articulatory unit, in turn combines with an idea, to form another complex unit (both **physical** & **psychological**)
- 3. Language has an individual aspect and a social aspect.** One is not conceivable without the other.
- 4. Language at any given time is an established system and an evolution...** an established system in the present and a product of the past. ... the connexion between the two is so close that it is hard to separate them. ...

There is no way out of the circle!

Indeed - Language Is Full of Contradictions and Dualities

1. The psychological aspect of human language - **meaning**:

- Meaning (& consciousness) are possible only through the **act of thought** (generalization)
- There is no word (sign) without meaning. **The formation of meaning is the main function of the sign.** Meaning is the property of the sign.
- On the other hand, meanings cannot exist without their physical 'signs' - words:

*But I forget what I to say so wanted ...
And fleshless thought dissolves in other shadows ...*

- Language = knowledge of the words & of how to put them together in social communication (the purpose of language)

2. The physical aspect of human language

Sound production & perception:

- The **physical forms** that we can perceive with our **physical senses** of hearing or sight (sounds/ writing), as well as the organs that produce & perceive them:
- The physical organs of
 - speech production – the so-called ‘organs of speech’ and
 - speech perception – our ears, brains, etc. (eyes for Sign)

3. The social function of human language (**communication**)

Communication of experience (memory/ feeling/ thought) is impossible without the mediating system of human speech 'born of the need of intercourse during work.'

Vygotsky: 1934

The **synthesis** of both **intellectual** & **social** functions of speech:

- **double function** of the sign - communication of meaning

4. The historical nature of human language:

At any given time, it is an institution in the present and a product of the past.

Examples from Shakespeare:

- *Thou liest, abhorred tyrant; with my sword I'll prove the lie thou speakest*
- *What dost thou think?*
- *Take thy face hence!*
- *Where goest thou?*
- *Hark! She speaks. I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.*
- *'tis time to do't. Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeared?*

Fundamentals of Saussure's Structuralism

1. 'Signs comprising a language are not abstractions, but real objects'
2. 'Linguistics studies these objects and the relations between them'
3. Any linguistic entity exists only by virtue of the association between signal and signification
4. Each linguistic sign is an integral part of the language system because of its difference from all the others
5. Meaning vs. Value of the Linguistic Sign

The Language Mechanism

- Language creates meaning through different combinations of linguistic signs.
- In the language system, 'everything depends on relations' between signs. These relations and differences are of two kinds:
 - **Linear** (syntagmatic): Peter fries fish : Fish fries Peter
 - **Associative:**

This kind of connexion between words is of quite a different order. It is not based on linear sequence. It is a connexion in the brain. Such connexions are part of that accumulated store which is the form the language takes in an individual's brain
(Saussure)

Saussure saw the '**language mechanism**' in the **simultaneous functioning of syntagmatic and associative relations between Linguistic Signs.**

'Groups of both kinds are in large measure established by the language. ...

This set of habitual relations is what constitutes linguistic structure and determines how the language functions. ...

Syntagmatic groups formed in this way are linked by interdependence, each contributing to all. Linear ordering in space helps to create associative connexions, and these in turn play an essential part in syntagmatic analysis.'

In his search for something **concrete, tangible**, something that 'our minds can grasp,' Saussure deliberately limited his view of language to the structure of **concrete objects** (signs) and relations between them (the 'concrete entities' of the linguistic science).

Saussure: The goal of linguistics is to describe the mechanism of language, its structure, in minute detail;

This is only possible in isolation from the tangle of contradictions, inherent in live communication /speech ☐

This **emphasis on fixed structures**/ objects, 'something our minds can satisfactorily grasp' and describe, prompted the development of the **descriptive approach** that flourished in the 20th century and is still dominant in linguistics today.


American Structuralism

- An offshoot of anthropology

First half of the 20th century

In America, linguistics began as an offshoot of **anthropology**

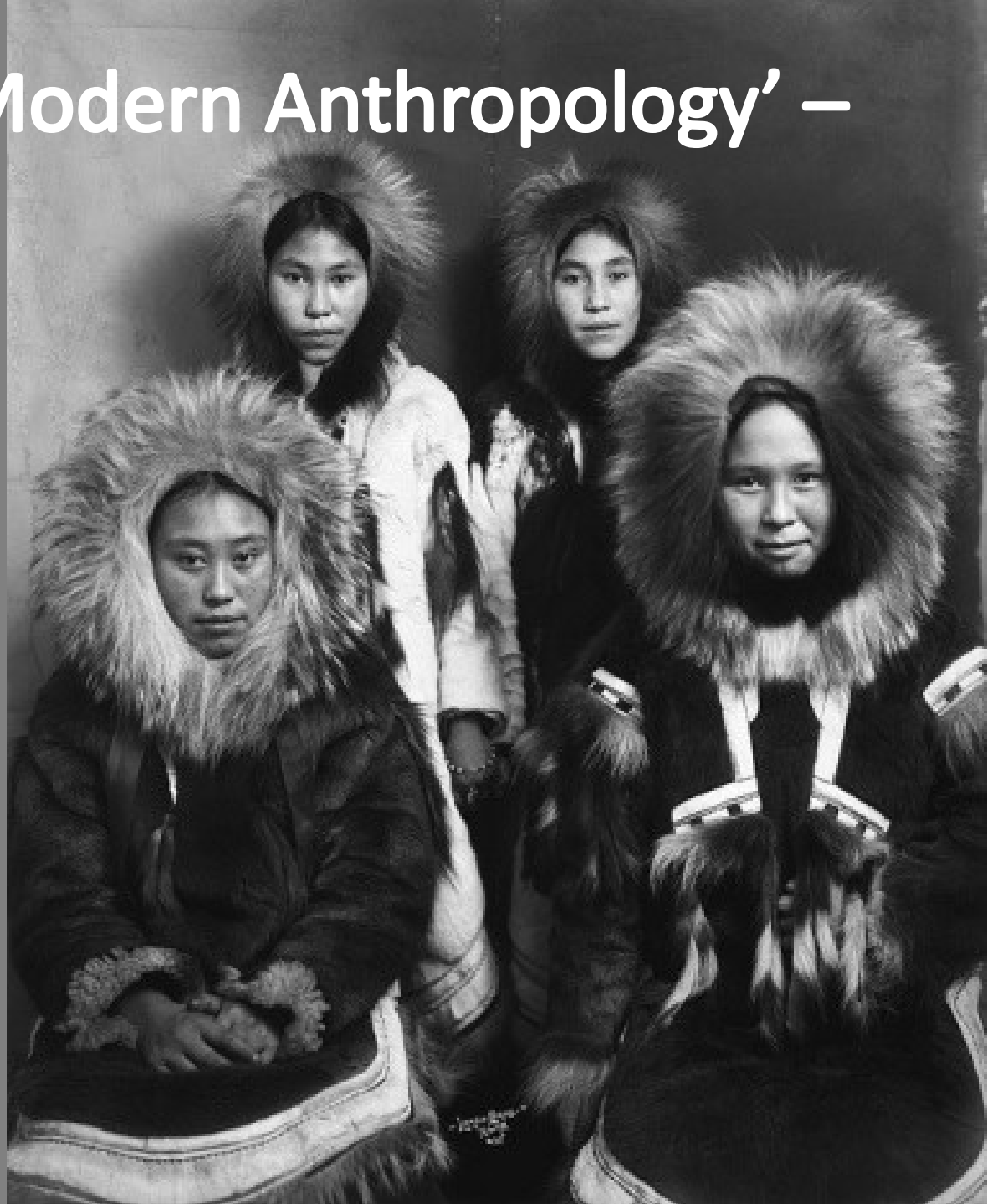
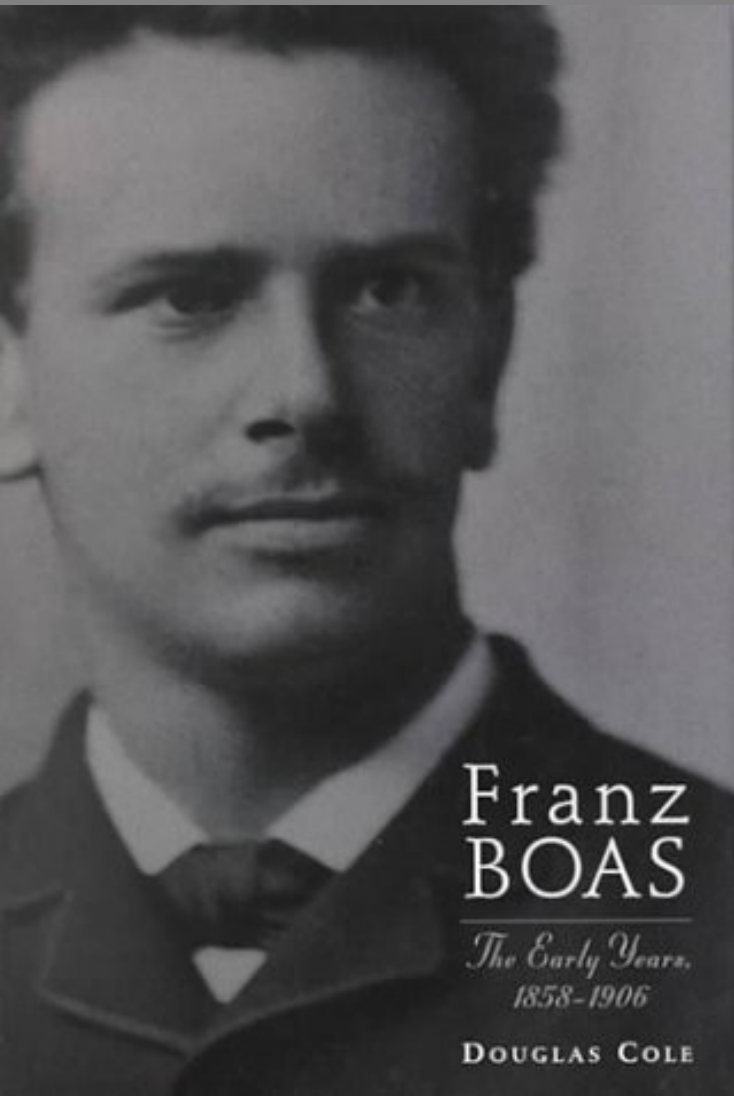
Purpose: to record the cultures and languages of the fast-dying American Indian tribes

A black and white photograph of Franz Boas, an older man with a mustache, wearing a dark suit and a white shirt with a dark tie. He is leaning forward, looking towards the right of the frame with a thoughtful expression. The background is a plain, light color.

Franz Boas
**Father of Modern
Anthropology**

Why he was a
Champion of Equality

The 'Father of Modern Anthropology' – Franz Boas



- 'Race, Language and Culture' (1940) – collection of essays
- Contributed mainly to cultural, biological and linguistic anthropology

Franz Boas (1858-1842)



Franz Boas Onboard the Germania in 1883,
on his Expedition to Baffin Island



The Mind of Primitive Man (1911), one of his best books, integrated his theories concerning the history & development of cultures:

- In any given population, biology, language, and culture are autonomous; no one of these dimensions is reducible to another
- Culture does not depend on any independent variables
- The biological, linguistic, and cultural traits of any group of people are the product of historical developments involving both cultural and non-cultural forces
- Cultural plurality is a fundamental feature of humankind, and
- The specific cultural environment structures much individual behaviour

In his Preface to it, he wrote:

“**The concept of racial type** as commonly used even in scientific literature is misleading and **requires a logical as well as a biological redefinition**. While it would seem that a great number of American students of biology, psychology and anthropology concur with these views, popular prejudice, based on earlier scientific and popular tradition, has certainly not diminished, for race prejudice is still an important factor in our life.”

“Still worse is the subjection of science to ignorant prejudice in countries controlled by dictators.

Such control has extended particularly to books dealing with the subject matter of race and culture.

Since nothing is permitted to be printed that runs counter to the ignorant whims and prejudices of the governing clique, there can be no trustworthy science.”

Boas: The Mind of Primitive Man (1911)

There is no fundamental difference in the ways of thinking of primitive and civilized man.

A close connection between race and personality has never been established.

THE MIND
of
PRIMITIVE MAN

FRANZ BOAS

REVISED EDITION

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

Race : Language : Culture

Proof of **diffusion of cultural elements** may be found everywhere. Neither differences of race nor of language are effectual barriers for their spread.

In North America, California offers a good example of this kind ; for here many languages are spoken, and there is a certain degree of differentiation of type, but at the same time a considerable uniformity of culture prevails (Kroeber 2, 3).

Another case in point is the coast of New Guinea, where, notwithstanding strong local differentiations, a fairly characteristic type of culture prevails, which goes hand in hand with a strong differentiation of languages.

Language : Culture

The historical development of mankind would afford a simpler and clearer picture if we were justified in the belief that in primitive communities the three phenomena had been intimately associated. No proof, however, of such an assumption can be given. On the contrary, the present distribution of languages, as compared with the distribution of types, makes it plausible that even at the earliest times within the biological units more than one language and more than one culture were represented.

Race & Language

I believe it may safely be said that all over the world the biological unit disregarding minute local differences is much larger than the linguistic one; in other words, that groups of men who are so closely related in bodily appearance that we must consider them as representatives of the same variety of mankind, embrace a much larger number of individuals than the number of men speaking languages which we know to be genetically related.

Race & Language

Examples of this kind may be given from many parts of the world. Thus, the European race including under this term roughly all those individuals who are without hesitation classed by us as members of the White race would include peoples speaking Indo-European, Basque, Semitic and Ural-Altaic languages. West African Negroes would represent individuals of a certain Negro type, but speaking the most diverse languages; and the same would be true, among Asiatic types, of Siberians; among American types, of part of the Californian Indians.

So far as our historical evidence goes, there is no reason to believe that the number of languages which according to their form and content cannot now be traced back to a common mother tongue has at any time been less than it is now. All our evidence rather goes to show that the number of apparently unrelated languages was much greater in earlier times than at present. We have so far no means of determining whether a still earlier condition existed in which the languages that appear as distinct were related in some way. On the other hand, the number of types that have presumably become extinct seems to be rather small, so that there is no reason to suppose that at any time there should have been a nearer correspondence between the number of distinct linguistic and anatomical types; and we are thus led to the conclusion that presumably at an early time small isolated groups of people of similar type existed, each of which may have possessed a language and culture of its own.

Incidentally we may remark here, that, from this point of view, the great diversity of languages found in many remote mountain areas should not be explained as the result of a gradual pressing-back of remnants of tribes into inaccessible districts, but appears rather as a survival of an earlier general condition of mankind, when every continent was inhabited by small groups of people speaking distinct languages. The present conditions would have developed through the gradual extinction of many of the old stocks and their absorption or extinction by others, which thus came to occupy a more extended territory. However this may be, **the probabilities are decidedly against the theory that originally each language and culture was confined to a single type, or that each type and culture was confined to one language; in short, that there has been at any time a close correlation between these three phenomena.**

If type, language and culture were by origin closely related it would follow that these three traits developed approximately at the same period and conjointly. This does not seem by any means plausible. ...

...the differentiation of the more important subdivisions of the great races antedates the formation of the recognizable linguistic families. At any rate, the biological differentiation and the formation of speech were, at this early period, subject to the same causes that are acting upon them now, and our whole experience shows that these causes may bring about great changes in language much more rapidly than in the human body.

In this consideration lies the principal reason for the theory of lack of correlation of type and language, even during the period of formation of types and of linguistic families.

If language is independent of race this is even more true of culture. In other words, when a group of a certain racial type migrated over an extended area before their language had attained a form that we are able to recognize as a single linguistic family, and before their culture had taken forms, traces of which we may still recognize among their modern descendants, it will be impossible to discover a relation between type, language and culture, even if it had existed at an early time.

It is quite possible that people of a common type expanded over a large area and that their language during this process became so thoroughly modified in each locality that the relationship of the modern forms, or rather their common descent from a common tongue, can no longer be discovered.

In the same way their culture may have developed in different ways, quite independently of their ancient culture, or at least in such ways that genetic relations to the primitive form, if they existed, can no longer be ascertained.

If we accept these conclusions and avoid the hypothesis of an original close association between type, language and culture, **it follows that every attempt to classify mankind from more than one of these points of view must lead to contradictions.**

... the vague term "culture" ... is not a unit which signifies that all aspects of culture must have had the same historical fates. The points of view which we applied to language may also be applied to the various aspects of culture.

There is no reason that would compel us to believe that technical inventions, social organization, art and religion develop in precisely the same way or are organically and indissolubly connected. As an example illustrating their independence we may mention the Maritime Chukchee and the Eskimo who have a similar, almost identical material culture, but differ in their religious life; or the various Indian tribes of the western Plains; or those Bantu tribes whose economic lives are alike but who differ in social structure.

Lack of cohesion appears most clearly in attempts to chart cultural traits

Limits of distribution do not agree, neither in reference to the distribution of types and languages, nor to that of other cultural phenomena such as social organization, religious ideas, style of art, etc.

Each of these has its own area of distribution. Not even language can be treated as a unit, for its phonetic, grammatical and lexicographic materials are not indissolubly connected, for **by assimilation different languages may become alike in some features**. The history of phonetics and lexicography are not necessarily tied up with the history of grammar.

The so-called "culture areas" are conveniences for the treatment of generalized traits of culture, generally based on sameness of geographic and economic conditions and on similarities of material culture. If culture areas were based on language, religion or social organization they would differ materially from those generally accepted.

Applying this consideration to the history of the peoples speaking Aryan languages we conclude that this language has not necessarily arisen among one of the types of men who nowadays speak Aryan languages; that none of them may be considered a pure, unmixed descendant of the original people that spoke the ancestral Aryan language; and that furthermore the original type may have developed other languages beside the Aryan.

.....

The considerations which in the beginning of our discussion led us to the conclusion that in modern times primitive tribes have no opportunity to develop their innate abilities, prevents us from forming any opinion in regard to their racial hereditary faculty. In order to answer this question we need a clearer understanding of the historical development of culture. This subject will be dealt with in the following chapters. (p. 158).

'Bloomfieldian Era'

Leonard Bloomfield (1887 – 1949)

- **Language** (1933) – over 5000 pages long
- Language study must always be centred on the **spoken** language
- Definitions used in grammar should be based on the **forms** of the language, not on the meanings of the forms; and
- A language at a given time is a complete system of sounds and forms that exist independently of the past – so that the history of a form does not explain its actual meaning.
- **Phoneme** – the most basic element

Sapir Quotes

- We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

‘Bloomfieldian era’ – 1930s – 1950s

Focus – writing descriptive grammars of unwritten languages:

- Collecting sets of utterances from native speakers of these languages, and second,
- Analysing the corpus of collected data by studying the phonological and syntactic patterns of the language concerned, as far as possible without reference to meaning.
- Items were (in theory) identified and classified solely on the basis of their distribution within the corpus.

Bloomfield and his followers were interested in the **forms** of linguistic items, and in the way the items were arranged, not in meaning (semantics).

According to Bloomfield, meaning was not observable using rigid methods of analysis, and it was therefore 'the weak point in language study.'

Bloomfield claimed that linguistic phenomena should be studied in isolation from their non-linguistic environment.

Adhering to behaviourist principles, he avoided all but empirical description.

Discovery Procedures

For American structuralists, the ultimate goal of linguistics was the perfection of the discovery procedures – a set of principles which would enable them to ‘discover’ the linguistic units of an unwritten language.

Because of their overriding interest in the internal patterns, or ‘structures’ of language, they are sometimes labelled ‘structuralists.’

Reminder

Reason for American structuralism:

Hundreds of indigenous American Indian languages that had never been previously described. Many of these were spoken by only a handful of speakers and, if they were not recorded before they became extinct, they would be permanently inaccessible; ☐

Focus on developing sound **methods** for the documentation and analysis of unfamiliar languages.

“The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.”

— Edward Sapir

Sapir's Quotes

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.”

— Edward Sapir: Language



Sapir's Quotes

Language is an anonymous, collective and unconscious art; the result of the creativity of thousands of generations.

In a sense, every form of expression is imposed upon one by social factors, one's own language above all.

Sapir's Quotes

The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.

It would be naïve to imagine that any analysis of experience is dependent on pattern expressed in language. Any concept, whether or not it forms part of the system of grammatical categories, can be conveyed in any language. If a notion is lacking in a given series, it implies a different configuration and not a lack of expressive power.

Sapir's Quotes

Nonverbal communication is an elaborate secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all.

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality.



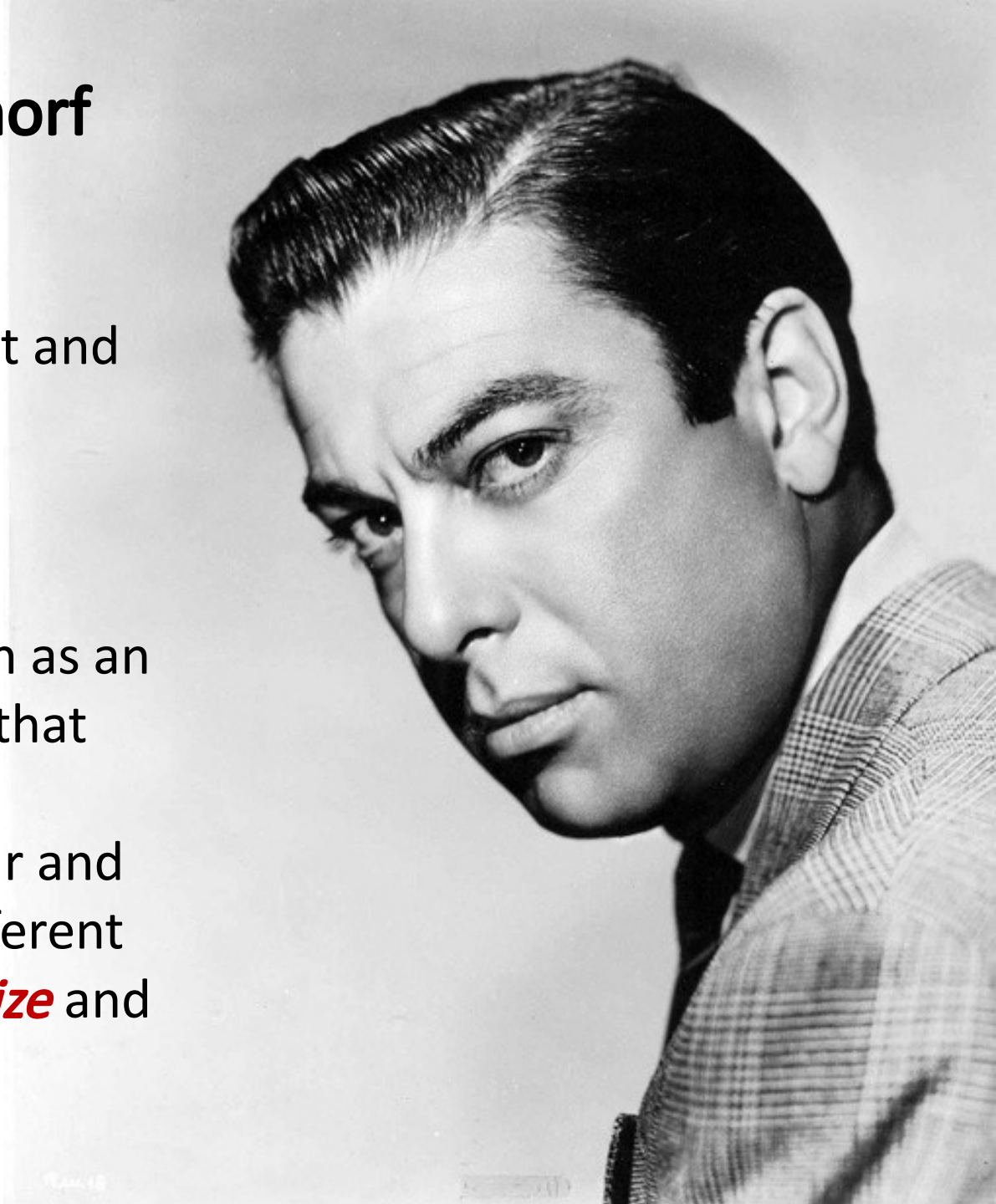
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— *Edward Sapir* —

Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941)

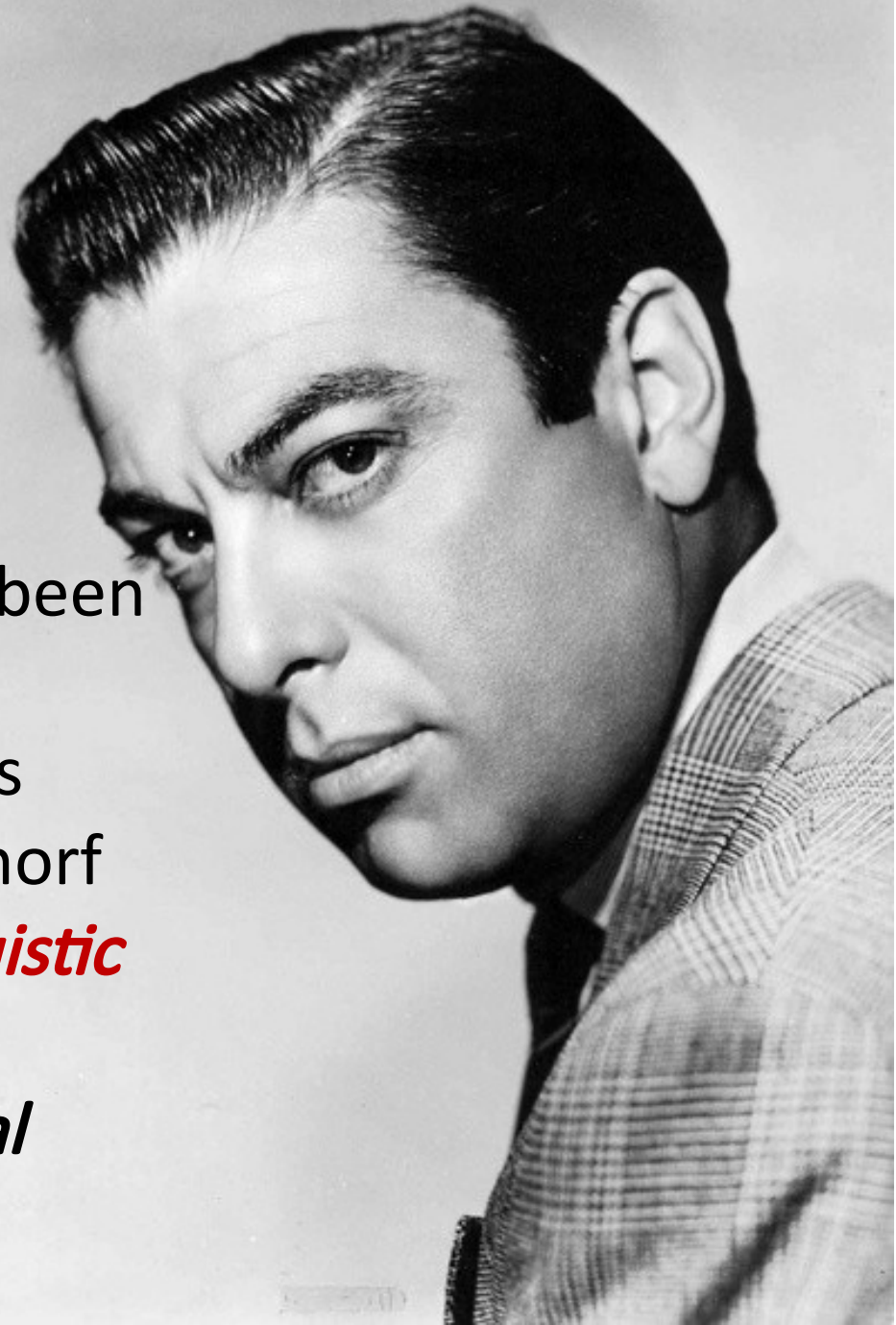
- An American linguist and chemical engineer
- **Sapir's protegee**

Whorf is widely known as an advocate for the idea that because of linguistic differences in grammar and usage, speakers of different languages **conceptualize** and **experience** the world differently.



The "Sapir–Whorf hypothesis"

This principle has frequently been called the "Sapir–Whorf hypothesis", after him and his mentor Edward Sapir, but Whorf called it the principle of *linguistic relativity*, by analogy with Einstein's principle of *physical relativity*.



Whorf Quotes

“Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about.”

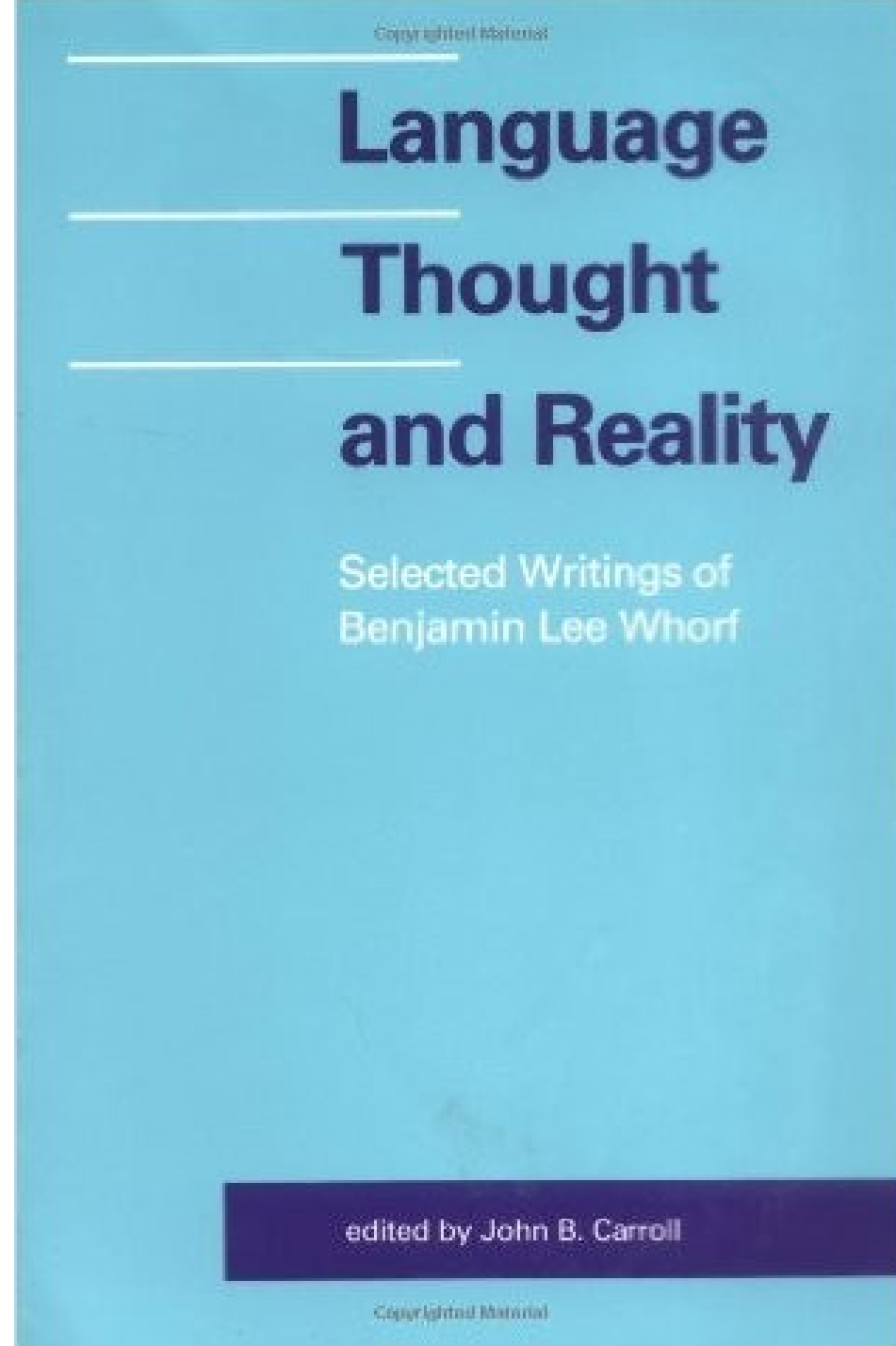
“We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.”

“A fair realization of the incredible degree of the diversity of linguistic system that ranges over the globe leaves one with an inescapable feeling that the human spirit is inconceivably old; that the few thousand years of history covered by our written records are no more than the thickness of a pencil mark on the scale that measures our past experience on this planet; that the events of these recent millenniums spell nothing in any evolutionary wise, that the race has taken no sudden spurt, achieved no commanding synthesis during recent millenniums, but has only played a little with a few of the linguistic formulations and views of nature bequeathed from an inexpressibly longer past.”

BLW Quotes

Most metaphysical words in Hopi are verbs, not nouns as in European languages.

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language.



BLW Quotes

Language is not simply a reporting device for experience but a defining framework for it.

Language, Thought, and Reality

Selected Writings of
Benjamin Lee Whorf

second edition

edited by John B. Carroll,
Stephen C. Levinson, and Penny Lee

BLW

After his death from cancer in 1941 his manuscripts were curated by his linguist friends who also worked to spread the influence of Whorf's ideas on the relation between language, culture and cognition. Many of his works were published posthumously in the first decades after his death.

In the 1960s Whorf's views fell out of favor and he became the subject of harsh criticisms by scholars who considered language structure to primarily reflect cognitive universals rather than cultural differences. Critics argued that Whorf's ideas were untestable and poorly formulated and that they were based on badly analyzed or misunderstood data.

BLW

In the late 20th century, interest in Whorf's ideas experienced a resurgence, and a new generation of scholars began reading Whorf's works, arguing that previous critiques had only engaged superficially with Whorf's actual ideas, or had attributed to him ideas he had never expressed.

The field of linguistic relativity studies remains an active focus of research in psycholinguistics and linguistic anthropology, and continues to generate debate and controversy between proponents of relativism and proponents of universalism.

By comparison, Whorf's other work in linguistics, the development of such concepts as the allophone and the cryptotype, and the formulation of "Whorf's law" in Uto-Aztecan historical linguistics, have met with broad acceptance.

Ethnoscience

Franz Boas established *cultural relativism* as an approach to understanding indigenous scientific practices. Cultural relativism identifies people's differences and shows how they are a result of the social, historical, and geographical conditions .

The Greek historian, **Polybius**, asserted “we mortals have an irresistible tendency to yield to climatic influences; and to this cause, and no other, may be traced the great distinctions that prevail among us in character, physical formation, complexion, as well as in most of our habits...” (quoted in Harris, 1968: 41).