

Crossing Three Worlds: The Intellectual Life of Edward Sapir

Leila Monaghan

Northern Arizona University

2017

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Monaghan, Leila, 2017. "Crossing Three Worlds: The Intellectual Life of Edward Sapir", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : article1085.html

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

© UMR9022 Héritages (CY Cergy Paris Université, CNRS, Ministère de la culture)/DIRI, Direction générale des patrimoines et de l'architecture du Ministère de la culture. (All rights reserved).

Your use of this article indicates your acceptance of the Bérose site (www.berose.fr) terms and conditions of use, available [here](#).

Visited on 23 February 2024 at 04:22

Linguistic anthropologist Edward Sapir (1884-1939) negotiated between multiple worlds of linguistic study. Writing for *American Mercury* magazine in 1924, Sapir argued, "There are two ways, it seems, to give linguistics its requisite dignity as a science. It may be treated as history or it may be studied comparatively as form." Reflecting this, his work included traditional 19th century historically-oriented philology, 20th century synchronic study of linguistic form, and exploring the relationship between the individual and culture. He was also known as an elegant prose writer, a talented poet, and an accomplished musician. His later work combining ideas from linguistics, cultural anthropology and psychology has had a critical influence on current linguistic anthropology.

Born in Lauenberg, Germany, and New York City-raised, Sapir was fluent in languages including English, German, and Yiddish. He studied philology as an undergraduate and Masters student in the Columbia University Germanics Department. Philology was a tremendously influential discipline in the late 19th century, part of a range of historical theories of the era including the historical materialism of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and the theory of evolution from Charles Darwin (1809-1882). European philologists such as Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) used historical written sources to posit regular rules concerning sound change and other language structures. By 1878 the *Junggrammatiker*, known in English as the Neogrammarians, Hermann Osthoff (1847-1909) and Karl Brugmann (1849-1919) were positing "sound laws suffer no exceptions." Robert Blust (1940-) argues that "the general intellectual climate of Europe in the 1870s was attuned to the belief in the rule of natural law

and the ultimate triumph of technology.” It was the influence of Franz Boas (1858-1942) that converted Sapir to anthropology and the study of American Indian languages, and away from the strictures of sound laws. Boas’s work was much more influenced by wave model theorists such as Hugo Schuchardt (1854-1926), Johannes Schmidt (1843-1901), and Jules Gilliéron (1854-1926) whose motto was “each word has its own history,” the linguistic equivalent of Boas’s historical particularism.

Sapir’s ability with languages and training gave him the skills he needed to systematize the study of American Indian languages. Philologically, Sapir’s greatest achievement was simplifying the 58 different language families described by John Wesley Powell (1834-1902) into six historical groupings. While Powell’s work was a review of previous studies, focused on the nomenclature for various Native groups and languages, Sapir’s work was an examination of a wide range of languages using techniques developed to categorize Indo-European language groups. Sapir classified North American languages into six main groups, Eskimo-Aleut, Algonkin-Wakashan, Nadene, Penutian, Hokan-Siouan, and Aztec-Tanoan. Although some of these language families are debated today, Sapir’s work is widely recognized by scholars such as Lyle Campbell (1942-) as a critical set of hypotheses to be tested.

Reflecting his 19th century milieu, Powell advocated an evolutionary approach to language and culture. Both Boas and Sapir, however, moved away from an evolutionary approach, part of a larger early 20th century turn against Darwinism. In 1900, scientists including Hugo de Vries (1848-1935) and Carl Correns (1864-1933) rediscovered the genetic experiments of Gregor Mendel (1822-1884), throwing doubt on Darwin’s work. It wasn’t until the 1930s that evolutionary theories again received widespread support. Reflecting this anti-evolutionary milieu, in 1931 Sapir characterized what had been known as phonetic laws as “merely general statements of series of changes characteristic of a given language at a particular time.”

Sapir graduated with a PhD in anthropology from Columbia University in 1909. His dissertation was a grammar of the Takelma language based on fieldwork done in Oregon in 1906. His Takelma work was published among other places as part of Boas’s 1922 *Handbook of American Indian Languages, Part 2*. He also worked on a range of other languages including North American Nootka, Yana, Chinook, Navaho, and Kwakiutl. His earliest fieldwork was done during his first fellowship with Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960) at the University of California and a subsequent fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1910, he was hired to develop an Anthropology Division with the Canadian Geological Survey in Ottawa and continued his work documenting a range of North American languages. Not only did he travel to Native communities in the United States and Canada for linguistic fieldwork, he also worked with specific individuals in other settings. For example, one key informant was Tony Tillohash (c. 1888-1970), a Paiute and Carlisle student whom Sapir hired to work with him at the University of Pennsylvania during his time in Philadelphia. In 1915, he was invited by Kroeber to work with Ishi (c. 1861-1916), last survivor

of the Yahi, who died of tuberculosis shortly afterwards. Sapir also worked on other languages including Judeo-German, Chinese, and extinct languages such as Indo-European and Tocharian. He considered “a well ordered language” as “characteristic of every known group of human beings.”

While Sapir felt somewhat isolated during his years in Canada, he did keep in close touch with Boas and other American colleagues. For example, he published five reviews in the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, founded by Boas and Pliny Earle Goddard (1869-1928) in 1917. The emphasis on grammar and lexicon in IJAL rather than comparative philological work foreshadowed the influence of the synchronic approach that was to become the norm in the 1920s and beyond.

In 1925, Sapir was offered a position at the University of Chicago, where he was a close colleague of linguist Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949). Bloomfield was a leading proponent of the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Like Sapir and Bloomfield, Saussure was a trained philologist who moved away from a narrow historical view of language. In 1916, students posthumously reconstructed and published his lecture notes in *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. In a review of the 1922 second edition, Bloomfield argued Saussure “has given us theoretical basis for a science of human speech.” The synchronic study of language, focusing on the complexities of present day languages, became the norm.

Structural linguistics, however, often neglected individual speakers, an ongoing concern for Sapir. In 1917, for example, he wrote, “it is always the individual that really thinks and acts and dreams and revolts.” As Sapir’s student Mary Haas (1910-1996) pointed out, this led to Sapir’s work not always fitting within Bloomfieldian linguistics. “The fresh perspectives so characteristic of Sapir’s linguistics were labeled “mentalistic” and were considered unsuitable topics for linguists to study.” Bloomfield argued in his review of Saussure, for example, that “all psychology will ever be able is to provide the general background which makes the...[language system] possible.” Sapir, in contrast, emphasized combining linguistics, psychology and anthropology, something he displays in his article “The Psychological Reality of the Phoneme.” In 1931, he was invited to develop a combined program at Yale including hosting a Rockefeller Foundation seminar on culture and personality.

In pieces such as “Why Cultural Anthropology Needs the Psychiatrist,” Sapir argued that there is cultural variation in all cultures. He gave an example from the work of James O. Dorsey (1848-1895) where Dorsey wrote “Two Crows denies this.” Sapir argued that Dorsey was ahead of his time in recognizing that culture is made up of individuals with varying belief systems that can contradict each other on occasion. Another concept from psychology that Sapir found important was the idea of the unconscious. He pointed out in “The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society” that individual and social behavior are inextricably linked and that varying phonetics of languages is a perfect example of this. An individual native French speaker might have trouble with distinguishing the /s/ of sick and the /th/ of thick because of the larger phonological patterns of French. His theories were also a key part of the field of culture and personality developed by anthropologists such as

Margaret Mead (1901-1978) and Ruth Benedict (1887-1948). As *The Psychology of Culture: A Course of Lectures*, reconstructed by Judith Irvine (1945-) from student notes taken in Sapir's Yale seminars, makes clear, Sapir intended to do much more work in the field. His plans were cut short, however, by his early death from a heart attack in 1939.

While Sapir's writings were wide and varied, he did not have a direct hand in the development of the most famous work bearing his name, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, developed by his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) in "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Language to Behavior." This work expanded upon Sapir's comment that, "We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." The mentalist school of anthropological linguistics, however, did not survive the premature deaths of Sapir in 1939 and Whorf two years later in 1941 at the age of 44.

When academia opened up in the 1960s, researchers returned to Sapir and Whorf for writings outside of the descriptive grammars of the field of anthropological linguistics practiced by many of Sapir's students from the 1930s through 1950s. Scholars such as Dell Hymes (1927-2009) and John Gumperz (1922-2013) renamed the field linguistic anthropology and focused much more on the intersections between language and culture. They and others created genres that reflected the synchronic traditions discussed in the 1920s and 30s by Sapir. Examples include the field of Ethnography of Communication including the analysis of specific performances and works focusing on texts analyzed using methods developed within Conversational Analysis. More recently, scholars in the subfield of Language, Culture, and History have emphasized combining rich synchronic understandings with a larger historical perspective, harkening back to 19th century theories about the importance of a historical perspective. Modern work on Sapir includes his collected works edited by a range of linguists and linguistic anthropologists.

Sapir wrote that he had no sense of being revolutionary but he forged paths that have fundamentally shaped the current field of linguistic anthropology. While he excelled at historical philology and the grammatical analyses of early linguistics, he had a keen sense that what he was studying was broader than language taken solely on its own, a view closely connected to his interest in the relationship between individuals and their languages and cultures. In a letter to Kroeber he wrote, "I feel rather like a physicist who feels that the immensities of the atom are not unrelated to the immensities of interstellar space."

Sources

(*Sapir references mentioned above are in Mandelbaum ([1949] 1985) unless otherwise listed.*)

Leonard Bloomfield, Review: *Cours de Linguistique Générale* by Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, *The Modern Language Journal*, 8 (5), 1924, pp. 317-319.

Leonard Bloomfield, *Language*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1933.

Robert Blust, The Neogrammarian Hypothesis and Pandemic Irregularity. In M. Durie and M. Ross (eds.), *The Comparative Method Reviewed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Franz Boas. *Handbook of American Indian Languages: The Takelma Language of Southwestern Oregon*. Vol. 40. US Government Printing Office, 1922.

Lyle Campbell, *Historical linguistics*. Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Lyle Campbell, The History of Linguistics. In M. Aranoff and J. Rees-Miller (eds) *The Handbook of Linguistics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

William Cowan, Michael Foster, Konrad Koerner, *New Perspectives in Language, Culture, and Personality*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986.

Regna Darnell. *Edward Sapir: Linguist, Anthropologist, Humanist*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1990.

Catherine Fowler and Don Fowler. Edward Sapir, Tony Tillohash, and Southern Paiute Studies. In W. Cowan, M. Foster, E. Koerner *New Perspectives in Language, Culture, and Personality*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996.

Patrick Geary, European Nationalism and the Medieval Past. *Historically Speaking* 3 (5), 2002, pp. 2-4.

Mary Haas, *Language, Culture, and History*. Stanford University Press, 1978.

Robin Marantz Henig, *The Monk in the Garden: The Lost and Found Genius of Gregor Mendel, The Father of Genetics*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

Judith Irvine, *Edward Sapir: The Psychology of Culture, A Course of Lectures*. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.

David Mandelbaum, *Edward Sapir: Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, [1949] 1985.

John Wesley Powell, Indian Linguistic Families of America: North of America. Seventh Annual Report of the *Bureau of Ethnology, 1885-'86*. Washington, DC, 1891.

Edward Sapir, Do We Need a "Superorganic"? *American Anthropologist* 19 (3), 1917, pp. 441-447.

Edward Sapir, *The Collected Works of Edward Sapir*. General Editor, Philip Sapir. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 16 vols, 2008-2020.

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Paris, Éditions Payot & Rivages, [1916] 1995.

Benjamin Lee Whorf, The Relations of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language. *Language, Culture, and Personality: Essays in Honor of Edward Sapir*, edited by L. Spier, A.



Hallowell, and S. Newman. Menasha, WI, Sapir Memorial Publication, 1941, pp. 75-93.