

Bloomfield's View of Language

1) Who is Bloomfield?

Leonard Bloomfield (born April 1, 1887, Chicago, Ill., U.S.—died April 18, 1949, New Haven, Conn.) was an American linguist whose book *Language* (1933) was one of the most important general treatments of linguistic science in the first half of the 20th century and almost alone determined the subsequent course of linguistics in the United States.

Bloomfield was educated at Harvard University and the universities of Wisconsin and Chicago. He taught from 1909 to 1927 at several universities before becoming professor of Germanic philology at the University of Chicago (1927–40) and professor of linguistics at Yale University (1940–49).

Concerned at first with the details of Indo-European—particularly Germanic—speech sounds and word formation, Bloomfield turned to larger, more general, and wider ranging considerations of language science in *An Introduction to the Study of Language* (1914).

In the writing of *Language*, Bloomfield claimed that linguistic phenomena could properly and successfully be studied when isolated from their non-linguistic environment. Adhering to behaviourist principles, he avoided all but empirical description.

2) Bloomfield: The Father of Linguistic Science

Bloomfield's contributions to linguistic studies must be addressed in any discussion about him. His primary goal was to study linguistics objectively. Bloomfield started his career as an Indo-European historical linguistics scholar and unlike other fundamentalists who refused to learn non-Indo-European languages, he learned other languages. He later used his historical background to shift his focus to descriptive linguistics. On the significance of his study of language to the development of linguistics, Bloch (as quoted in Nagm, 2014, p.1458) said,

It is not much to say that every significant refinement of analytic method produced in this country since 1933 has come as a result of the impetus given to linguistic research by Bloomfield's book *Language*. If today our methods are in some ways better than his, if we see more clearly than he did himself certain aspects of structure that he first revealed to us, it is because we stand upon his shoulders.

Bloomfield contributed to the study of language in various ways and this included his behaviouristic approach in linguistics, his attitude towards the study of meaning, his theory of sound change, and his descriptive linguistic claims.

The Origin of Linguistic Science

Linguistics (German Sprachwissenschaft, French linguistique) took its beginning, historically, in the study of writings which were preserved for their religious or aesthetic value. As these texts antiquated, interpretation of their language became necessary and led finally to a grammatical codification of their forms. In this way the study of philology (German *Philologie*, French *philologie*), —that is, of national cultural tradition, — came to include a linguistic discipline whose aim was the practical one of making intelligible and preserving certain writings. Thus originated the treatises of the Indian grammarians (chief among them Panini, fourth century B.C.), the Ancient Greek grammar (especially Dionysios Thrax, second century B.C., and Apollonios Dyskolos, second century of our era), the Latin grammars (Donatus, fourth century, Priscian, sixth century), the Hebrew grammar, and so on.

The linguistic study at this stage was properly a means to an end, a prodrome to philology. Nevertheless, there were always scholars, who, be it from a genuine but misguided interest in language or from sheer pedantry, confined themselves to this grammatical study. Thus there developed a pseudo-linguistics, which occupied itself with grammatical dissection of texts, with haphazard etymologies, and with vague theorizing as to origins.¹⁾ A further impulse to this grammatical study was felt when the popular language deviated from that of the texts to the point where the latter became unintelligible, or when people of alien speech adopted the culture and with it the philologic studies of a more advanced nation. Both of these conditions were given in medieval Europe, where classical Latin had become unintelligible to the people of Romance tongue and was foreign to the northern nations. At first the teaching of Latin (and, when it was revived, that of Greek) was conducted on a sensible basis: the language was spoken, written, and read until the student had firm command of it and easy access to the classical literature. Later, however, pedantry prevailed: in spite of such great educators as (in the sixteenth century) Ascham and (in the seventeenth century) Ratichius and Comenius, theoretical grammar came more and more to be looked upon as a means of learning the ancient languages. This went so far that, for example, up to very recent times English schoolboys had to memorize the entire contents of a Latin grammar before they were allowed any real contact with the language. It was only a slight alleviation of this barbarity when the rules of grammar were at least illustrated by disconnected sentences. This latter method prevailed when, early in the nineteenth century, modern languages came to be studied in Europe for practical purposes; accordingly, the grammatical facts of these were codified in imitation of Latin and Greek and became the basis of instruction. This sentence-method, used in the books of Ahn, Ollendorff, and many successors, is still, in various modifications, supreme in American schools.

It was the opening to Europe of India and the widening of cultural and scientific interests which we call the romantic movement, that led to a more fruitful study of language. The romantic interest in things ancient and distant made European thinkers ready to receive the Indian culture which such men as William Jones and Colebrooke brought from the East. This culture included, in the manner above described, grammatical treatises dealing with Sanskrit, the sacred and literary language of India, — treatises in which European scholarship found a linguistic achievement beyond any it had known.

The new interest in linguistics did not, of course, confine itself to the Indo-European languages: it led also to the study of language in general. This study received its foundation at the hands of the Prussian statesman and scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767—1835). Humboldt's work has been followed in two directions. The study of the languages of the world has resulted in a series of disciplines parallel to Indo-European linguistics, each studying a set of related idioms. The other direction in which Humboldt may be said to have led the way, — although here the older grammarians have been not without influence, — is the study of the conditions and laws of language: its psychic and social character and its historical development.

(Bloomfield, *An Introduction to the Study of Language*, 1914)

- Read the text then answer the following.

Task 1. Say whether the following statements are true or false when false say why.

- The interest of linguistics in its early stages was directed to the spoken form of language.
- Philology was a central part of linguistics in its beginning.

- Pseudo-linguistics was limited to a grammatical analysis of texts.
- The study of language was affected by the romantic movement in Europe.
- English schoolboys used to learn Latin grammar rules by being exposed to separate sentences.

Task 2. Read the following excerpt by Bloomfield about how linguistics should be studied. Why do you think he started with the study of phonetics?

How to study linguistics. a) The student who wishes to devote all or any considerable part of his time to the study of language should begin with that language whose facts are immediately accessible to him,— of course, his own. He should diligently watch his articulations, practise their phonetic notation, and observe individual and local variations from his own usage. This observation must be accompanied by an elementary study of phonetics (...) The learner should then go on to the morphology and syntax and finally the phraseologic and stylistic features of the language he hears and speaks every day.

The Study of Language

Language plays a great part in our life. Perhaps because of its familiarity, we rarely observe it, taking it rather for granted, as we do breathing or walking. The effects of language are remarkable, and include much of what distinguishes man from the animals, but language has no place in our educational program or in the speculations of our philosophers.

There are some circumstances, however, in which the conventionally educated person discusses linguistic matters. Occasionally he debates questions of "correctness" whether it is "better," for instance, to say it's I or it's me. His discussion of such things follows a fairly rigid pattern. If possible, he looks to the conventions of writing for an answer— as, say, for the question whether a t is to be pronounced in words like often or soften. Otherwise he appeals to authority: one way of speaking, he believes, is inherently right, the other inherently wrong, and certain learned men, especially the authors of grammars and dictionaries, can tell us which is which. Mostly, however, he neglects to consult these authorities, and tries, instead, to settle the matter by a kind of philosophical reasoning, which operates with terms such as "subject," "object," "predicate," and so on. This is the common-sense way of dealing with linguistic matters. Like much else that masquerades as common sense, it is in fact highly sophisticated, and derives, at no great distance, from the speculations of ancient and medieval philosophers.

It is only within the last century or so that language has been studied in a scientific way, by careful and comprehensive observation; the few exceptions will occupy us in a moment. Linguistics, the study of language, is only in its beginnings. The knowledge it has gained has not yet become part of our traditional education; the "grammar" and other linguistic instruction in our schools confines itself to handing on the traditional notions. Many people have difficulty at the beginning of language study, not in grasping the methods or results (which are simple enough), but in stripping off the preconceptions which are forced on us by popular scholastic doctrine. **(Bloomfield, 1933, Language)**

Read text 1 entitled “The Study of Language” and answer the following questions.

1. Why was the study of language neglected in the past according to the text?
2. What did the discussion of linguistic matters include in its old version?
3. What were the difficulties faced at the beginning of the study of language?

References

- Bloomfield, L. (1914). *An introduction to the study of language*. Henry Holt and Co.
- Bloomfield, L. (1933). *Language*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. (2024, March 28). *Leonard Bloomfield*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leonard-Bloomfield>
- Nagm, N. (2014). Bloomfield: The Father of linguistic science. *The Scientific Journal of the Faculty of Letter*, 2014 (27), 1456-1471