

# The History of Linguistic Anthropology as a Device for a New Integrated Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*The history of the emergence of linguistic anthropology helps us not only to reflect on the path-dependency of our own scientific categories, but also to enlarge our own perspective beyond these categories. The following paper tries to develop on the basis of Latour's network theory a new integrated perspective that reflects our own historical position in the network of constructing scientific facts, in the context of political problems, of social claims of objects that we are using in order to constitute our scientific field.*

**Key words:** *linguistic anthropology, scientific categories, language, culture*

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## Introduction

*The Indian must have a knowledge of the English language, that he may associate with his white neighbours and transact business as they do. He must have practical industrial training to fit him to compete with others in the struggle for life. He must have a Christian education to enable him to perform the duties of the family, the State, and the Church.<sup>1</sup>*

The bias of U.S. politics of the 1880s was clear. The American Indians had to be assimilated, had to give up their cultures and languages, and had to emulate their new white vanquishers. Out of this historical context, the scientific field of

linguistic anthropology emerged. The aim of the first scientifically-working anthropologists was therefore the preservation of the American Indian languages. Linguistic anthropologists supported the prevailing politics concerning reservations, and they assumed a measure of »political responsibility.« They constituted a discipline that was theoretically concerned with the relationship between culture and environment and between language and race. These scientific interests reflect the social and political context of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Darwinism and Spencerism were the leading scientific paradigms.

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A look at the history of the birth and development of linguistic anthropology helps us understand both the interdependency of politics and science, and the way in which we are still arguing within the same categories of culture, language and environment. The history of the emergence of linguistic anthropology helps us firstly, to reflect on the path-dependency of our own scientific categories, and secondly, to enlarge our own perspective beyond these old categories.

The following paper is a short attempt to outline the historical development of the categories constituted by linguistic anthropologists such as Boas and to show how interrelated we still are with these concepts today.

### **Historical Development of Linguistic Anthropology**

If we want to reconstruct the North American linguistic anthropology, firstly, we have to contextualize the scientific field of linguistic anthropology, and secondly, we have to reflect on the problems inherent to an emerging discipline. In particular, it is worth taking the effort to look at its understanding of language in order to draw conclusions about our own (contemporary) categories that help us to do research. These categories are, of course, also constructs of scientific practices.

An appropriate theoretical basis for a project like a historical reconstruction is the concept of the sociology of science as articulated by Latour, a former anthropologist. Latour tried to construct an analytical framework that could enable us to make a sociology or history of science that went beyond a whig history, that is, a history made for the sake of the present. Let me sum up his ideas briefly<sup>2,3</sup>.

As you certainly all agree, scientific work is very heterogeneous. Co-operation is indispensable to science in order to cre-

ate common understanding, to ensure reliability across domains, and to gather information that retains its integrity over time and distance and within the context of local contingencies. This co-operation creates a 'central tension' in science between divergent viewpoints, and the need for generalizable findings. This is also the case with linguistic anthropology, where it seems that we are not allowed to limit our work to a history of ideas, or a history of the professionalization of science for its own sake. Latour shows us another way to go. Latour, who came originally from the semiotic tradition, generates a kind of network theory in which all the different actors and actants are interconnected. The term 'actant' is used by Latour to include non-humans in the definition of science. For the 'linguistic anthropology' case study we have the actors: 'scientists,' 'politicians,' 'institutions,' and 'American Indians;' and we have the actants: 'the American Indian languages,' 'laws,' 'political decisions,' etc. This network approach gives us the possibility to see how the scientists treated their subject, and how their findings were used for different purposes.

### **American Tradition**

If we start our history with the founding of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879 in Washington DC, we find a scientific (and not-so-scientific) study of the American Indian languages<sup>4</sup>. The Bureau was extremely important in the scientific development of anthropology – helping to provide the discipline that was the ground on which the scientific field of linguistic anthropology was able to develop. Powell, the creator of the Bureau, was the first person to be able to provide institutional support for government-sponsored research into the American Indians and their languages. Powell propagated a linguistic study<sup>5,6</sup> that was influenced di-

rectly by the evolutionary concept of Morgan. Morgan asserted that the evolution of humanity followed the three stages of primitivism, barbarism and civilization<sup>7</sup>. Powell proposed, as an analogy to Morgan's theory, that culture, language, mind, and race were concepts that were interconnected insofar that they were dependent on the stage at which any particular culture had reached. In other words: A primitive mind of a primitive culture speaks a primitive language.

Boas, the German immigrant and former physician, broke with this idea. In his *Handbook of American Indian languages*<sup>8</sup> he started to see concepts such as race, language and culture as independent categories and to unhinge them from Morgan's rigid framework. In particular he began to reflect on the relationship between the categories of language and culture, asking if there was a connection between the two. Does language, or do linguistic categories, provide an insight into the human mind? We are particularly familiar with this view of seeing language or language categories from the linguistic relativity principle that is rashly connected with the names of Sapir, a student of Boas', and Lee Whorf, a student of Sapir's. According to Boas,

*... the categories of language compel us to see the world arranged in certain definite conceptual groups which, on account of our lack of knowledge of linguistic processes, are taken as objective categories and which, therefore, impose themselves upon the form of our thoughts.*<sup>9</sup>

The connection between language, worldview or culture, and the form of thoughts was established. Whorf continued working on this concept, as we know, and established linguistics as the most important science in order to achieve a scientific progress. If we get to know the limits of our own categories, we can develop new ones. Thus, the main concern

of the earlier linguistic anthropologists was the documentation of grammatical structures of American Indian languages, and other indigenous languages without writing. They considered language as the medium through which myths and historical narratives could take form. And they looked at language as either a window on culture or, in Humboldt's more extreme (*Weltanschauung*) hypothesis, a determiner of thought.

The interesting thing is that the famous physician and historian of science, Kuhn, took Whorf's idea of language-dependent worldview and developed the idea of a paradigm-guided or paradigm-influenced science<sup>10</sup>. In other words, Kuhn adopted the Boasian, Sapirian and Whorfian idea that the way we see and interpret the world is dependant on a certain kind of language or – as he called it – paradigm. With this idea he inherited the problem of incommensurability: If we accept that a scientific paradigm or a certain kind of culture deals with a certain kind of perspective of reality, we are not able to translate from one paradigm or culture to another because they are incommensurable. This is a serious problem as it is very difficult for us as scientists to describe other scientific paradigms, or for us as anthropologists to describe other cultures. If we accept this theory, we are always part of a particular scientific community or culture that is incommensurable to that we want to describe – the crises of representation is an expression of this problem.

Let us return to linguistic anthropology. The conceptualization of linguistic relativity has often been reformulated or extended as new research questions are forthcoming. Hymes, for instance, the famous linguistic anthropologist, expanded the notion of linguistic relativity beyond merely the ways in which linguistic structure may influence our experience of the world<sup>11</sup>. He also included the way in which

cultural patterns, for example, specific cultural activities, can influence language use and determine the functions of language in social life. According to Duranti linguistic anthropology today is »the understanding of the crucial role played by language in the constitution of society and its cultural representations.«<sup>12</sup> Even though Hymes is talking of cultural patterns and Duranti of cultural representations, we still have got the two entities 'language' and 'culture' and the description as to how they are interrelated.

The relation and interdependency between culture and language are defined scientific concepts that we accept as 'realistic' and that we don't want to give up. But isn't it perhaps more gainful to start thinking in different categories, categories in which language and culture are differently connected?

Within the sociology of science, historians and sociologists started to reflect on the problem we have when we are doing research in a paradigm-guided way. Latour, for instance, deals in his book *Pandora's Hope* with the question of how to describe a scientific fact, or as he calls it a scientific entity, while being aware of the problem of incommensurability.

*To define an entity, one will not look for essence, or for correspondence with a state of affairs, but for the list of all the syntagms or associations into which one element enters. This non-essentialist definition will allow for a considerable range of variations, just as a word is defined by the list of its usages.*<sup>3</sup>

Latour used a Wittgensteinian approach to define what a scientific fact is. As an analogy to Latour's example, we could now think about conceptualizing culture or cultural representations, or language, or the relation between the two entities as something defined by a list of their usages.

## Conclusion

As linguistic anthropologists we accept categories such as social class, sex, gender, race and generation as being socially constructed. And if we are looking at our own history of linguistic anthropology we consider the contingency of the development of the established scientific categories like language and culture. Nevertheless, we still accept these categories as being realistic ones and we don't consider the fact that these concepts are also constructed. Therefore, shouldn't we start to realize that if we are talking of language as linguists or as linguistic anthropologists we are using a concept which is a non-essentialist one, which means that it allows for a considerable range of variations? Shouldn't we regard language, culture, and the relationship between the two as »boundary objects,« i.e. as

*[...] a space, one that acquires its authority precisely from and through episodic negotiations of its flexible and contextually contingent borders and territories?*<sup>13</sup>

With the new perspective within a complex network we are able not only to solve the problem of incommensurability but also to develop a new integrated perspective of the network we are part of. We are looking at language as a concept that is connected not only with culture, but also with the people using the language, our own political and historical context, our linguistic theories, our institutional dependencies, and so on. In other words, as Latour suggests, we should perhaps start to reflect on our own positions in the network of constructing scientific facts, in the context of political problems, of social claims of objects that we are in a way abusing in order to constitute our science. Probably we are developing a new integrated perspective for our scientific work.

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## POVIJEST LINGVISTIČKE ANTROPOLOGIJE KAO SREDSTVO ZA CJELOVITIJE PROMATRANJE STVARNOSTI

### SAŽETAK

Povijest lingvističke antropologije pomaže nam ne samo u razmišljanju o uvjetovanosti našeg znanstvenog kategoriziranja, već i u širenju našeg vidokruga i izvan tih kategorija. Člankom se pokušava, na temelju Latourove teorije mreža, razviti novi način cjelovitijeg promatranja stvarnosti koje odražava naše mjesto u povijesti izgradnje znanstvenih činjenica, u kontekstu političkih problema i društvenih potraživanja objekata koje koristimo za uspostavljanje određenog polja znanosti.