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Discussion 1K

Assignment #1

Throughout the course of his research, Boas focused on documenting the native languages he was studying and using that documentation to write grammars for the languages. As he did so, he encountered the idea of linguistic diversity. He first saw this as he analyzed the grammatical structure of the “primitive” languages, which was different from that of the “civilized” languages. Boas noted that the language tended to develop towards the primary interests of the people, and that neither system was objectively superior to the other in terms of functionality (Boas, Introduction 25). He also noted this diversity in the natives’ sound systems. When Boas first began his research on the American Indian languages, the notion of “alternating sounds” was often associated with primitive languages (Boas, On Alternating Sounds 52). The perceived occurrence of alternating sounds in primitive languages resulted in the misconception that they were less developed than more civilized languages. However, pulling on the concept of sound blindness, Boas came to the realization that it was not the speaker producing alternating sounds, but the listener having alternating perceptions. As the observer attempts to transcribe a native’s speech, any novel sounds made by the speaker are filtered through the observer’s knowledge of his own language, resulting in an unconscious bias that makes transcriptions inconsistent. Prior to Boas’ conclusions, this inconsistency served as evidence of the underdeveloped nature of primitive languages. However, when the roles were reversed and the natives attempted to understand civilized languages, they also interpreted them as consisting of

alternating sounds. This showed that the division between civilized and primitive along these terms was clearly unfounded.

Unlike Boas' more scientific approach to analyzing language, Malinowski focused more on the pragmatic force behind speech. In his initial analysis, Malinowski claimed that, while the primitive purpose of language was as a "mode of action", it could become an "instrument of thought" in the hands of a civilized people (Malinowski, *The Problem of Meaning* 296).

Malinowski would later change his perspective to claim that language always acts to create some form of action, eliminating a critical distinction between primitive and civilized languages (Malinowski, *Coral Gardens* 7). As the use of language is always intended to generate action, the only way to acquire a complete understanding of a language is to understand the reality and experiences of the speakers, a concept Malinowski calls the "context of situation". As a result, Malinowski's goal during his study in the Trobriands became the understanding of the native language, as understood by native speakers. He noted that it was impossible to understand one language in the context of another, implying that one language's words can never be fully translated into another's. Since words must be accompanied by context to constitute meaning, every language takes on a large degree of complexity. "Civilized" languages are no more complex than "primitive" languages, because both employ the cultural background of the speaker to influence action. Each language simply takes different paths to do so based on the context surrounding them.

As a student of Boas, Whorf expanded on the idea that language can act as a lens for a speaker's perception, coining the term linguistic relativity. Whorf begins by saying that, if languages are viewed as "primitive" or "civilized", then natural logic dictates that languages would simply act as different ways of expressing the same universal thoughts. Some languages

would perform this task better than others. Whorf proceeds to argue against this viewpoint by saying that natural logic is flawed due to it being restricted by and confused with the linguistic processes which guide it (Whorf, 211). The biggest claim that Whorf makes in regards to the non-existence of primitive languages is the “bipolar division of nature” present in English.

Whorf claims that the English language’s use of nouns and verbs cause speakers to divide their perception of the world according to English’s grammatical properties (Whorf, 212). He goes on to point out how nature itself does not abide by our classifications. As a result, our way of processing the world does not fall in line with nature and is therefore not objectively correct. He uses this to further support the concept of linguistic relativity by showing that languages align themselves with the speakers’ perspectives of the world, dividing nature in ways that make sense to the people. This tells us that languages aren’t inherently primitive or civilized, they are simply adapted to the circumstances of the speakers. The concepts of primitive vs. civilized originate from a person’s inability to escape the biases created by their native language.