How Structuralist was 'American Structuralism'?*

The term structuralism was first used in psychology, starting with Angell (1907), but the general intellectual movement it would come to designate in the 1950s and after began in linguistics, as did the first strong challenge to 'structuralist' dominance. Starting in 1957 and with rapidly accelerating force from about 1960–62 onward, the 'transformational-generative linguistics' of Noam Chomsky (b.1928) set out to undo the underpinnings of American 'structuralist' linguistics. Structuralism became the vieux jeu of the older 'establishment' generation, swept aside by the transformational generativism of the young rebels. This version of events is accepted for example by Culler (1975: 7), who writes that 'generative grammar plays no role in the development of structuralism', though Jean Piaget (1896–1980) makes 'transformations' one of his three defining features of structuralism and thereby incorporates Chomsky into the very centre of the movement (Piaget 1970 [1968]: 81-92). With another 20 years' hindsight, Piaget's view is all the more convincing. American linguistics before Chomsky shared several features with European structuralism that differentiated them both from the earlier historically-dominated linguistics, but on a number of essential doctrinal points the gulf between them was as wide as the Atlantic. Many of these doctrinal points were the very ones Chomsky overturned, and in so doing he narrowed the gulf considerably. From the European perspective, looking beneath the overt terms of the debate, it was Chomsky who brought fully-blown structuralism to American linguistics for the first time by undoing a decades-long resistance to it.

Here again the story is complex, because the development of linguistics in America and Europe can never be fully separated or integrated. Of the two most prominent American linguists of the first half of the century, Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) was German-trained and began his career as a follower of Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), while the German-born Edward Sapir (1884–1939) was trained by a German émigré who became one of the most celebrated anthropologists in America, Franz Boas (1858–1942). Boas is widely credited with establishing the basis of what would become the

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'distributional' method for the analysis of languages that is at the heart of what is usually identified as 'American structuralism' (notably by Hymes & Fought 1981). Back in Europe, Claude Lévi-Strauss (b.1908) would acknowledge Boas and his students Alfred Kroeber (1876–1960) and Robert H. Lowie (1883–1957) as his central influences in anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]: 59), while in America, Bloomfield, in a 1945 letter, responds testily to criticisms of his 1933 book for supposedly ignoring Saussure, saying that in fact Saussure's influence is evident 'on every page' (Cowan 1987: 29). Yet as shown in Joseph (1990: 58-63), Bloomfield (1927) read Saussure as a behaviourist manqué, a feat he accomplished by 'dropping' the concepts of signified and signifier in favour of 'actual object' and 'speech utterance' respectively, as if in so doing he simply clarified what Saussure was trying to say. Bloomfield's desire for European–American linguistic integration seems to have outweighed any concern with presenting a faithful and cogent reading of Saussure.

From the early 1930s there were regular, if sporadic, contacts between American linguists and their counterparts in Prague and Paris, London and Copenhagen. The cross-fertilisation can be seen most clearly in work on the common core of their interests, the phoneme, understood by both Bloomfield and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) as a bundle of distinctive features (see Bloomfield 1933: 79; Joseph 1989). But the differences are no less salient. Even within America, Bloomfield and his followers understood the phoneme as a category for the description of behaviour, while Sapir gave greater weight to its psychological force (see Sapir 1933). In Europe, where behaviourism had not exerted such an impact, there was little problem in accepting the Saussurean view of the language system as being simultaneously a mental and a social reality. Despite this rather fundamental difference, a common faith in the existence of the abstract category of the phoneme sufficed to make transcontinental dialogue possible, with occasional static.

After Sapir's death in 1939, Bloomfield's approach began to take over in America, and its position was definitively solidified when it became the basis for the highly successful preparation of language teaching materials during the War. With its steadfast rejection of anything 'mentalistic' as being inherently metaphysical and therefore not amenable to scientific study, American linguistics under the Bloomfieldian aegis had considerably less in common with structuralism of the European variety than in the 1930s when the bridging figure of Sapir was dominant. If we ask what was 'structuralist' about Bloomfieldian linguistics from a European perspective, looking back to the principal tenets of Saussurean thought as a grounding, we do find points in common: synchronicity, arbitrariness, the social nature of language, the idea that in language *tout se tient*, distinct syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes. But Saussure's semiology has been reinterpreted as stimulus and response; and perhaps the greatest difference is that meaning no longer exists within language but in all those stimuli out in the world. For Bloomfield there can be no

signified because the mind, even if we accept its existence as a matter of commonsense experience, is not objectively observable, and therefore out of bounds for scientific purposes. Hence there can be no such thing as 'value' in the Saussurean sense — a concept so central to Saussure's thought that it means even the seeming convergences named above are only partial. Nor can the existence of the language system be in any way psychological or, worse, unconscious. Most Bloomfieldian linguists denied the distinction between langue and parole in the very significant sense that they defined a language as a set of observable utterances, not an unobservable system which, given their refusal to have recourse to the mind, they would have been hard pressed to locate physically, as their methodology demanded. Finally, they were with few exceptions extremely sceptical about any 'universals' of language beyond the basic behavioural schema of stimulus and response. In view of these divergences it is misleading indeed to identify the Bloomfield-dominated linguistics of the 1940s and 50s as 'American structuralism'.

This was the linguistics against which Chomsky would come to position himself. His revolution lay partly in convincing American linguists that the behaviourist rejection of the mind was misguided, and that commonsense intuitions about the mental were not necessarily unscientific. He insisted on a distinction between 'competence' and 'performance' which in early work he likened specifically to the langue and parole of Saussure (although they were not exactly the same; see Joseph 1990), and maintained that linguistic competence was a discrete, unconscious component of the mind having a fundamentally universal structure, much as European structuralists had interpreted Saussure's langue. No less importantly, he introduced a distinction between 'deep' and 'surface' structure in language which was quickly latched onto by people outside linguistics and interpreted in ways far removed from Chomsky's original intention, but reshaped by them according to their deep-seated sense that words do not mean what they purport to mean (as discussed further in Joseph 1999a). This sense has been at the root of many 'functionalist' developments in 20th century linguistics, particularly within European structuralism, where the notion of separate conscious and unconscious minds is taken for granted. Hence European structuralists had comparatively little difficulty reconciling Chomsky's basic views with their own, even if the reconciliation was based upon a misinterpretation from Chomsky's point of view. At the same time, his notion of transformational rules by which one gets from deep to surface structure, which had no obvious precedent within European structuralism, was absorbed into it as Chomsky's original contribution, revolutionary because it released the structuralist system from the static inertia Saussure had saddled it with. But while injecting structuralism with a new dynamism, transformations, it soon became apparent, made the system too 'powerful' in the sense that one could explain anything with no effort, simply by introducing an ad hoc transformation.

Although Chomsky maintains a self-propagation myth according to which he was never influenced by any of the teachers whose influence he acknowledged profusely in his early publications, he does not deny his contacts from the 1950s onward with Jakobson, to whom Chomsky & Halle (1968) is dedicated (for an analysis of Chomsky's quirks as a historian, see Joseph 1999b). It was Jakobson presenting him to the (largely European) audience of the 9th International Congress of Linguists in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1962 that is generally seen as marking the start of his international prominence. Moreover, the principal intellectual debts Chomsky has acknowledged apart from Saussure and Jakobson have been European rather than American, including the linguists of 17th century France (see Chomsky 1966), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and Otto Jespersen (1860–1943). In view of the fact that he set American linguistics on a path significantly less at odds with the Saussurean framework while undoing none of the common points between Bloomfield and Saussure (except perhaps the amount of lip service paid to the social nature of language, which Chomsky did not deny but simply excluded from his realm of interest by defining that realm as the competence of an idealised native speaker–hearer in a homogeneous speech community), it seems reasonable to argue that Chomsky introduced structuralism into American linguistics, more fully than any of his predecessors. His new, transformational structuralism, which in Piaget's (1968) perspective looks as if it were an inevitable development in structuralist thought, briefly defined a minor generational gap among French structuralists; and may, through its excessive power, have helped hasten the pace of the reductions to absurdity by which structuralism would ultimately come to be rejected.

For a long period from the 1960s through the 1980s, Chomsky's conception of the mind was very influential in psychology, and moderately so in the more conservative discipline of philosophy. Psycholinguistic studies of language learning continue to be heavily influenced by Chomsky's views. His notion of the 'modular mind' with its genetically determined structural underpinnings was at the basis of much early work in cognitive science, and came to form the target in opposition to which new conceptions were aimed. The fact that Piaget blatantly jumped onto the structuralist bandwagon (Piaget 1968) shortly before attacking Chomsky's assertion that language operates as an autonomous module within the mind (rather than, as Piaget believed, interactively with other facets of perception and cognition) only reinforced the widespread notion that the Chomsky's view is the opposite of the structuralist one. If however we are correct in evaluating Chomsky as a structuralist for the reasons outlined above, then the exportation to psychology of the conception of language and mind for which he is primarily responsible figures as a very significant structuralist legacy.

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