

## Leonard Bloomfield and the Exclusion of Meaning from the Study of Language

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### Abstract

In this study the attempt was made to find out whether Bloomfield was only interested in the structural description of language, and therefore he excluded the study of meaning. This was done by the examination of his (1933) published book LANGUAGE which is still considered to be the most relevant study on language ever written, because it covers all traditions of language study – historical-comparative, philosophical-descriptive and practical-descriptive.

The present paper has shown that Bloomfield regarded meaning as a weak point in language study and believed that it could be totally stated in behaviorist terms. For Bloomfield, the context of situation was an important level of linguistic analysis alongside syntax, morphology, phonology, and phonetics, all of which contribute to linguistic meaning. Meaning then covers a variety of aspects of language, and there is no general agreement about the nature of meaning. This paper, therefore, should be considered only as a clarification of Bloomfield's understanding of meaning.

**Key words:** Context of situation; Traditional grammarians; Behaviourism; Mentalistic psychology; Linguistic meaning; Generative grammar

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### INTRODUCTION

Bloomfield's approach to linguistics can be characterized by his emphasis on its scientific basis, his adherence to behaviourism, and by his emphasis on formal procedures for the analysis of linguistic data. This approach put the American linguists at dispute not only with rival approaches but also with the wide-spread philosophy and humanities. De Beaugrande emphasizes this aspect in his (1991) published book, he writes "Bloomfield's language fostered in American linguistics a spirit of confrontation not merely against rival approaches, but also against prevailing philosophy, language teaching, and the humanities at large" (83ff).

Bloomfield was annoyed with the philosophers because they "took it for granted that the structure of their language embodies the universal forms of human thought or even of the cosmic order, and looked for truth about the universe in what really nothing but formal features of one or another language" (1933, p.5). Philosophers then confined their grammatical observations to one language and stated them in philosophic terms. Bloomfield believed that philosophers were mistaken in that they "forced their description into the scheme of Latin grammar" (1933, p.5), and in that they held Latin to be "the logically normal form of human speech" (1933, p.8). For the same reason, Bloomfield criticized the traditional grammarians whose doctrine was to define categories of the English language in philosophical terms. Bloomfield was also at dispute with them because they were convinced that "the grammarian can prescribe how people ought to speak," and thus they "ignore actual usage in favour of speculative notions" (1933, p.7). Moreover, Bloomfield attacked the mentalistic psychology because of its inability to capture the totality of meaning, and because of its inaccessibility to scientific investigation by available techniques. This position of Bloomfield about mentalistic psychology was

misinterpreted as if he ignored the importance of meaning in human use of language. (cf. Palmer, F.R., 1982 and 1996). Nevertheless, Bloomfield regarded considerations of meaning as essential. His critics regard meaning as existent somewhere outside of the individual speaker. However, they tried to make practical use of the concept LINGUISTIC MEANING. This concept is concerned with relations within language and with relations between language and the outside world as well. The relations within language are associated with the lexical item (word) and with a lexical structure whose study is known as lexical or structural semantics; the relations between language and the external world are concerned with the meaning of language in terms of the situations to which language refers or in which language occurs. The relations between language and the world were excluded by some studies such as generative grammar studies. Thus, generative grammar stated the semantic component entirely in terms of the relations within language (cf. Bacon, 1998; Allan, 1986; Frawley, 1992).

## 1. BLOOMFIELD'S VIEWS OF LINGUISTICS AND MEANING

### 1.1 Bloomfield's Views of Linguistics

Bloomfield regarded the methods of linguistics as those of natural sciences. To support this view, he contrasted the mentalistic theory and the mechanistic theory about human conduct, including speech: "The mentalist theory supposes that the variability of human conduct is due to the interference of some non-physical factors, spirit or will or mind (that) does not follow the patterns of succession (cause-and-effect sequences) of the material world; the mechanistic theory supposes that the variability of human conduct, including speech, is due only to the fact that the human body is a very complex system (1933, p.32f). Therefore, the linguist's findings should not be "distorted by any prepossessions about psychology. Mechanism is the necessary form of scientific discourse. In all sciences like linguistics, which observe some specific type of human activity, the worker must proceed exactly as if he held the materialist (mechanist) view" (ibid). Thus, Bloomfield understood and explained the variability of human conduct, including speech, as part of cause-and-effect sequences. It must be emphasized that he does not deny non-physical processes posited by mentalistic theories like thoughts, images, and feelings. Bloomfield acknowledged that we have such processes, but explained them as popular terms for bodily movements that the speaker alone is aware of, private experiences, or soundless movements of the vocal organs. Bloomfield explained this by arguing that the speech and the practical events depend on predisposing factors which consist of "the entire life history of the speaker and hearer"

(1933:20). According to Bloomfield, these predisposing factors contribute to the explanation of the linguistic facts, since similar situations may not only produce different linguistic responses but also similar linguistic responses may occur in quite different situations. Palmer (1981) criticized Bloomfield's predisposing factors and said that they are no more open to observation than the thoughts, images, and feelings of the mentalists. Therefore, talking about predisposing factors involves the same circularity of argument as talking about the concepts of thoughts, images, and feelings, etc.

### 1.2 Bloomfield's Views of Meaning

According to Bloomfield, the definition of the meaning of a linguistic form is possible "when this meaning has to do with some matter of which we possess scientific knowledge" (Bloomfield, cited in Palmer, 1981, p.58). As it was for Sapir (1921, p.59ff), the meaning for Bloomfield was also a weak point in linguistic theory. Bloomfield asked for the separation between the study of grammar and the study of meaning. He also argued in favour of defining grammatical categories wholly in terms of the form of the language, the actually observable features. Thus, formal features, not meaning, should be the starting point of linguistic discussion. Bloomfield's exclusion of meaning from grammar is because meaning is often very vague, and meaning categories are not easily shown by description, and because these categories can be often defined only in terms of the formal features of a language. Palmer argued that this view is exactly the same as talking about predisposing factors. That is to say, if the grammatical categories are given semantic definitions, the definitions are circular. As an example is the definition of a noun as 'a word used for naming anything'. The difficulty is that we do not have any way of establishing what 'anything' may be. Thus, the definition of the noun in terms of naming anything is totally circular. This circularity, Palmer argues, arises because we have no non-linguistic way of defining 'things' (cf. palmer, 1981).

Once again, Bloomfield argues for the exclusion of meaning from grammar; he points out that even when we can establish semantic and grammatical categories independently, they often do not coincide. He gives as an example the use of English tense which is not directly related to time since the past tense is used for future time in examples like 'if he came tomorrow ...'. From this example, it becomes clear that the basic grammatical categories of a language must be established independently of their meaning. And defining meaning in terms of the context of situation means that the scope of meaning will be infinite. Bloomfield was fully aware of this problem, which made him despair of any satisfactory treatment of meaning. Palmer sees that the problem of the study of meaning can be evaded by confining the study of language to 'tight' lexical relationships of the kind seen in 'unmarried / bachelor' or 'short/ long', and confessed that

this kind of study will provide a very narrow semantic theory that can hardly be said to deal properly with meaning (cf. palmer, 1981, p.48).

Like Bloomfield, Firth (1957a) believed that the description of a language could not be complete without some reference to the context of situation in which language is used. But Bloomfield's description goes much further than Firth, who made statements of meaning in terms of the situation. Bloomfield defined meaning as the situation. For Bloomfield, meaning consists in the relation between speech and the practical events that precede and follow it. A linguistic form is "the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response it calls forth in the hearer" (1933, p.20). This shows that the meaning of a linguistic form is "equivalent to the sum total of all human knowledge, (since ) the situations which prompt people to utter speech include every object and happening in their universe" (1933, p.74). Thus, defining the meaning of every speech form in the language requires us to have "a scientifically accurate knowledge of everything in the speaker's world" (1933, p.139). Accordingly, the meaning of language can be defined only "if some science other than linguistics furnished us with definitions of the meanings, the meaning of the utterance (would) be fully analysed and defined, (if not), the statement of meanings is the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances far beyond its present state" (1933, p.140).

So far, it is obvious that Bloomfield suggests to narrow the scope of linguistics until the sciences can determine meanings and deliver them in strictly compiled forms. In the meantime, Bloomfield says, we can "act as though science had progressed far enough to identify all the situations and responses that make up the meaning of speech forms" (1933, p.77). Bloomfield, too, acknowledges that meaning "includes many things that have not been mastered by science" (1933, p.75). So long as science has no way of defining most meanings and demonstrating their constancy, Bloomfield says, "we have to take the specific and subtle character of language as a presupposition of linguistic study, just as we presuppose it in our everyday dealings... We may state this presupposition as the fundamental assumption of linguistics: in certain communities, some speech utterances are alike as to form and meaning. Each linguistic form has a constant and specific meaning. If the forms are different, we suppose that their meanings are also different" (1933, p.145). Bloomfield confessed that this assumption is true only within limits, even though its general truth is presupposed not only in linguistic study, but also by all our actual use of language. Assuming that some sameness lends each form a constant meaning collides with the thesis of continual innovation (cf. de Beaugrande, 1991, 4.23, p.65).

Meanings show instability in more than one way. For example, dictionary meanings can be either

normal (central) or marginal (transferred); Bloomfield acknowledged that "we understand a form in the normal meaning unless some feature of the practical situation forces us to look to a marginal meaning" (1933, p.149). This link of meaning to the situation assists Bloomfield's stipulation in that "when the linguist tries to state meanings, he safely ignores displaced speech, but does his best to register all cases of transferred meaning: The practical situation (means) narrowed meanings ('car' for 'streetcar') and widened meanings ('fowl' for 'any bird'). Deviant meanings (are) not natural or inevitable, but specific to particular cultural traditions" (1933, p.150f). Thus, meanings are instable in the presence of connotations. This point was emphasized by Bloomfield: "connotative forms might be 'technical', 'learned', 'foreign', 'slang', 'improper' ... The chief use of our dictionaries (is to) combat such personal deviation (whose) varieties are countless and indefinable and cannot be clearly distinguished from denotative meaning" (1933, p.152ff).

In spite of the problems the linguist confronted with when studying meaning, Bloomfield by no means denied its importance for the study of language: "to study language (is) to study (the) coordination of sounds with meaning. In human speech, different sounds have different meanings. Linguistics (is made) of two main investigations: phonetics, in which we studied the speech-event without reference to its meaning; and semantics, in which we studied the relation of the event to the features of meaning" (1933, p.27, 74). Bloomfield was in doubt about the workability of such a scheme in practice, since our knowledge of the external world is so imperfect "that we can rarely make accurate statements about the meaning of a speech-form" (1933, p.74). For Bloomfield, there is another reason for the not workability of his scheme, purely phonetic observation cannot recognize the difference between distinctive and non-distinctive features of a language; this can be done only when we know the meaning. To escape this problem, Bloomfield suggested that we have to trust our everyday knowledge to tell us whether speech-forms are the same or different (cf. de Beaugrande, 1991, 4.26, p.65f). Bloomfield possibly refers here the issue to the "distinctive features which are common to all the situations that call forth the utterance of the linguistic form. Hearing several utterances of some one linguistic form, we assume (that) the situations of the several speakers contain some common features" (1933, p.141,158).

Though Bloomfield's model is essentially causal, he accepts Saussure's ideas that "the connection between linguistic forms and their meanings is wholly arbitrary" (1933, p.145).

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## CONCLUSION

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The present study has shown that Bloomfield's mechanistic approach should not be taken as if he gave a simple view of language, since he acknowledges the fact

that “ the human body (and) the mechanism which governs speech (are so) complex (that) we usually cannot predict whether a speaker will speak or what he will say” (1933, p.31). It has also shown that the study of meaning is not a clearly defined level of linguistics. Rather it is a set of studies of the use of language in relation to many different aspects of experience, to linguistic and non-linguistic context, to participants in discourse, to their knowledge and experience, to the conditions under which a particular bit of language is appropriate. The study of meaning relates to the sum total of human knowledge, though it must be the task of the linguist to limit the field of his study and bring order to the apparent confusion and complexity. The complexity of the study of meaning is merely one aspect of the complexity of human language. What we can say about meaning will be imprecise and often controversial.

Bloomfield in all his concern about language appeals for a linguistics which can make us critical of verbal response habits, and the investigation of the languages of the world may provide the basis for a “sound knowledge of communal forms of human behaviour. It is only a prospect, but not hopelessly remote, that the study of language may help us toward the understanding and control of human events” (1933, p.509).

This study also makes it clear that there can be no single, simple approach to the study of meaning, because there are many aspects of meaning both within language and in the relation between language and the world. The complexity of meaning reflects the complexity of the use of human language (cf. Davis and Brendan, 2004).

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