

LEONARD BLOOMFIELD

Influenced by Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield, in his notable work *Language* (1933), endeavoured, through the creation of his own version of structuralism, to “lay down a rigorous framework for the description of languages” (Aitchison, 1974: 33). According to Brown (2000: 8), Bloomfield stated that ‘only the “publically observable responses” could be subject to investigation. The linguist’s task, according to the structuralist, was to describe human languages and to identify the structural characteristics of those languages’. Thus, Bloomfield’s focus was on parole or speech: the observable or “outward manifestation of language”. He, along with other structural or descriptive linguists of the 1940s and 1950s, “chose largely to ignore langue and to study parole” (Brown, 2000: 10). As noted by Aitchison (1974):

“Bloomfield considered that linguistics should deal objectively and systematically with observable data. So he was more interested in the forms of a language than in meaning. The study of meaning was not amenable to rigorous methods of analysis and was therefore, he concluded, ‘the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state’” (Aitchison, 1974: 33).

In this section, we introduce the central notions and concepts of Bloomfield’s theory. A list of the most important concepts of the theory is provided below:

1. Bloomfield introduces the **notion of utterance** as one central element of his theory. Utterances are produced by acts of speech. The following quotes illustrate Bloomfield’s position: An act of speech is an utterance (1926: 154). A speech-utterance is what mathematicians call a continuum; it can be viewed as consisting of any desired number of successive parts (1933: 76). Example: We imagine a speaker. By making an act of speech, she makes an utterance. So, any kind of act of speech brings out an utterance.

2. A **speech community** is a group of people who interact by means of speech (1933: 42). The totality of utterances that can be made in a speech community is the language of that speech-community (1926: 155). This is necessary if we want to distinguish one language from another. As simple examples, we can think of the group of speakers of English and the group of speakers of German.

3. Bloomfield’s fundamental assumption of linguistics:

In order to make sense of Bloomfield’s fundamental thesis of **alikeness of utterances**, which he needs to distinguish groups of speakers (or speech communities), the following quote will be helpful:

To recognize the distinctive features of a language, we must leave the ground of pure phonetics and act as though science had progressed far enough to identify all the situations and responses that make up the meaning of speech-forms. In the case of our own language, we trust to our everyday knowledge to tell us whether speech-forms are “the same” or “different”. Thus, we find that the word ‘man’ spoken on various pitch-schemes is in English still “the same” word, with one and the same meaning, but that ‘man’ and ‘men’ ...are “different” words, with different meanings. In the case of a strange language we have to learn such things by trial and error, or to obtain the meanings from someone that knows the language ...the study of significant speech-sounds is phonology or practical phonetics. Phonology involves the consideration of meanings. The meanings of speech-forms could be scientifically defined only if all branches of science, including, especially, psychology and physiology, were close to perfection. Until that time, phonology and, with it, all the semantic phase of language study, rests upon an assumption, the fundamental assumption of linguistics: we must assume that in every speech-community some utterances are alike in form and meaning (1933: 77-8).

One group of speaker from another one is distinguished on the basis of this assumption. Speech-forms are classified on the basis of this too. Out of these speech forms, the linguist classifies the whole grammar of a language.

4. Bloomfield’s theory of semantics is behaviouristic. The following quote illustrates Bloomfield’s **behaviourist conception of meaning**:

Psychology, in particular, gives us this series: to certain stimuli A a person reacts by speaking; his speech B in turn stimulates his hearers to certain reactions C. By a social habit which every person acquires in infancy from his elders, A-B-C are closely correlated. Within this correlation, the stimuli A which cause an act of speech and the reactions C which result from it, are very closely linked, because every person acts indifferently as speaker or as hearer. We are free, therefore, without further discussion, to speak of vocal features or sounds B of stimulusreaction features A-C of speech (1926: 154). Example: We imagine a situation A where a person receives a stimuli, say, she feels hungry. Then, she might utter something like: “I am hungry!”. The actual utterance is the situation B, to speak with Bloomfield. This utterance, then, will stimulate others to certain reactions, linguistic or non-linguistic, this is Bloomfield’s C.

5. **Notion of Form and Morpheme:**

The notion of **form** is central for Bloomfield. Linguistic forms are different kinds of units of language, like **morphemes**. The *smallest units* which combine sound (or ‘vocal features’) and

meaning (or ‘stimulus-reaction features’) are called Morphemes. Bloomfield argued – “ Thus a form is a recurrent vocal feature which has meaning ... Meaningful unit of linguistic signalling, smallest or complex is a linguistic form; the meaning of a linguistic form is a linguistic meaning “(1933: 264). Forms are abstract, theoretical concepts. They are non-empirical, as opposed to utterances, with which the linguist is confronted at the beginning of his work. Any word is a form. Also the components of words, in their minimal occurrence, the morphemes, are forms. **A minimum form is a morpheme ...thus a morpheme is a recurrent (meaningful) form which cannot in turn be analyzed into smaller recurrent (meaningful) forms.** Bloomfield defines morpheme as “...a minimum form is a morpheme. Hence any unanalyzable word or formative is a morpheme ...” (1926: 155-156). Parts of bigger linguistic constructions like words are morphemes, e.g. English morphemes as ‘-ness’, ‘-hood’, or ‘-ing’.

7. Free and bound forms:

A form which may be an utterance is free. A form which is not free is bound (1926: 155). A minimum free form, for example, is any word, like ‘house’. ‘Free’ aims to suggest that it can stand alone and does not necessarily have to occur within a bigger linguistic construction. All that can be uttered with meaning is a free form, then. As opposed to this, a bound form would be a morpheme, like ‘-ness’. This morpheme, uttered alone, is not an utterance in Bloomfield’s sense, it has no meaning. Morphemes, on the other hand, are understood as bound forms. They always occur “bound”, or connected with other words, like in ‘happi-ness’.

8. Word:

Bloomfield says: “A minimum free form is a word. A word is thus a form which may be uttered alone (with meaning) but cannot be analyzed into parts that may (all of them) be uttered alone (with meaning)” (1926: 156). It is important to note that the emphasis lies on what can be uttered ‘alone’ are words. We can think of any word, like ‘hello’, ‘stop’, etc.

9. Phrase:

Phrases are used in grammar to distinguish the substructural parts of sentences. Today, it is standard to distinguish between noun-phrases like ‘the dog’ or verbal phrases like ‘bites’, amongst other types of phrases. As textual evidence, Bloomfield says: A non-minimum free form is a phrase (1926: 156). Phrases can stand alone, like words.

10. Syntactic constructions:

The notion of construction is part of syntactic theory in Bloomfield. Different non-minimum forms may be alike or partly alike as to the order of the constituent forms and as to stimulus-

reaction features corresponding to this order. The order may be successive, simultaneous (stress and pitch with other phonemes), substitutive (French *au* for *à le*, and so on). Such recurrent use of order are constructions ...The number of constructions in a language is a small sub-multiple of the number of forms. Each of the ordered units in a construction is a position. Each position in a construction can be filled only by certain forms (1926: 157-8). Syntactic constructions, then, are constructions in which none of the immediate constituents is a bound form (1933: 184).

11. Sentence:

The notion of sentence is explained as follows by Bloomfield: A maximum construction in any utterance is a sentence (1926: 158). Interestingly, he speaks of a maximum construction, letting us note that there is no construction which can be 'bigger' than a sentence. This goes along with our intuitions, for in everyday use of language, what we understand to be the largest linguistic constructions are usually sentences.

12. Phoneme:

The notion of phoneme is also of central importance in Bloomfield's theory. The phonemes are related to the linguistic forms and to the morphemes and are necessary to constitute the field of phonology within the whole discipline of linguistics. For Bloomfield a minimum same of vocal feature is a phoneme or distinctive sound. The number of different phonemes in a language is a small sub-multiple of the number of forms. Every form is made up wholly of phonemes (1926: 157) ...we can find forms which partially resemble *pin*, by altering any one of three parts of the word. We can alter first one and then a second of the three parts and still have a partial resemblance ...*pin-tin-tan* ...and if we alter all three parts, no resemblance is left, as in *pin-tintan-tack*. Further experiment fails to reveal any more replaceable parts in the word *pin*: we conclude that the distinctive features of this word are the three indivisible units. Each of these units occurs also in other combinations, but cannot be further analyzed by partial resemblances: each of the three is a minimum unit of distinctive sound-feature, a phoneme (1933: 79).