**Univeristy of Guelma 1st year Linguistics**

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**LESSON THREE: LINGUISTS’ CONTRIBUTION**

**4. LEONARD BLOOMFIELD**

**Biography**

 [Leonard Bloomfield](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Bloomfield) (April 1, 1887 – April 18, 1949) was an American linguist who led the development of structural linguistics in the United States during the 1930s and the 1940s. His influential textbook ***Language***, published in 1933, presented a comprehensive description of American structural linguistics.

 Besides [Edward Sapir](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Edward_Sapir), Bloomfield is often regarded as the most prominent [American](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/United_States) linguist of the first half of the twentieth century. His scientific approach to the study of [language](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Language) emphasized observable phenomena and the spoken language rather than abstract mentalistic processes, which helped bring linguistics closer to an exact science.

 Although his use of descriptive methods was not widely accepted, Bloomfield’s ideas were widely used. In the period after the publication of his *Language,* up to the mid-1950s, Bloomfield was considered the highest authority in the study of language. Together with his students, among others Bernard Bloch, [Zellig Harris](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Zellig_Harris), and Charles Hockett, he established the school of thought that has come to be known as American structural linguistics.

 After the 1950s, however, Bloomfield’s influence waned, as [logical positivism](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Logical_positivism) ceased to be the main preoccupation of [social sciences](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Social_sciences). Linguists again turned to more mentalistic attitudes and non-observable [cognitive](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cognition) processes. With the emergence of the generative grammar approach to linguistics initiated by Noam Chomsky in the 1960s, structural linguistics completely vanished from the linguistic mainstream.

 Bloomfield’s approach to linguistics was characterized by **its emphasis on the scientific basis of linguistics**, **adherence to behaviorism** (*Behaviourism is a psychological theory that focuses on objectively observable behaviours and discounts mental activities*)especially in his later work, and **emphasis on formal procedures for the analysis of linguistic data**. The influence of Bloomfieldian structural linguistics declined in the late 1950s and 1960s as the theory of Generative Grammar developed by Noam Chomsky came to predominate.

**Contribution to Linguistics**

 Leonard Bloomfield made several significant contributions to the field of linguistics that have had a lasting impact on the study of language. Here are some of his major contributions:

1. **Structural linguistics:** Bloomfield was a pioneer of structural linguistics, which emphasizes the analysis of the formal structure of language, including its sounds, grammar, and syntax.

He argued that the structure of a language should be studied objectively, based on observable data, rather than speculation about mental processes or meaning.

 Bloomfield adopted the concept of language structure from [Ferdinand de Saussure](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ferdinand_de_Saussure). Similar to Saussure, Bloomfield held that languages at all times consisted of systems of interrelated elements: lexical, [grammatical](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Grammar), and phonological. Bloomfield also took over Saussure’s distinction between a "diachronous" approach (where [time](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Time) is a variable) and a "synchronous" approach (where time is a constant). Bloomfield took an interest in both, arguing that language changes both throughout the course of history (diachronous), as well as at a specific point in time (synchronous).

 In order to separate linguistics from any mentalistic theory, Bloomfield rejected the classical view that the structure of [language](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Language) reflects the structure of thought. He believed that spoken language is the only object of study and applied different analytic procedures to study language. He showed how to analyze spoken language, dividing it into its smallest units—[phonemes](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Phoneme) (“vocal features”), morphemes (“stimulus-reaction features”), and combinations of those units that make higher lexical structures.

 Bloomfield also emphasized that linguists need to study spoken language rather than documents written in a language, because language changes over time and the meaning of something today might be different from what it meant in the past. The documents thus cannot be adequate representations of a spoken language.

1. **The concept of the phoneme:** Bloomfield developed the concept of the phoneme, which refers to the smallest unit of sound in a language that can change the meaning of a word. This idea was important in the development of structural linguistics and has become a fundamental concept in linguistics more broadly.
2. **The method of distributional analysis:** Bloomfield developed the method of distributional analysis, which involves the study of the distribution of linguistic elements (such as sounds or words) in different contexts. This approach helps to reveal the patterns and structures of language and has been widely used in linguistic analysis.
3. **The study of Native American languages:** Bloomfield conducted extensive research on Native American languages and was one of the first linguists to recognize the importance of studying these languages as a way to better understand the diversity of human language. His work in this area contributed to the development of descriptive linguistics, which aims to describe languages in as much detail as possible.

 Bloomfield was very familiar with the work of [Franz Boas](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Franz_Boas) on the descriptive analysis of the contemporary non-Indo-European languages, especially those of Native [American Indians](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/American_Indian). Bloomfield himself began with the study of one group of Indian languages, that of [Algonquin](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Algonquin) Indians. He performed a genetic examination of the Algonquian language family and reconstructed the Proto-Algonquian language, the ancient language spoken before it diverged into several contemporary languages. In addition, he was able to show that the neogrammarian theory of the regularity of sound change could be applied beyond the Indo-European language family. Bloomfield’s seminal paper on the Algonquin family remains a cornerstone of Algonquian historical linguistics today.

1. **The development of linguistic methodology:** Bloomfield's emphasis on empirical data and objective analysis has had a significant impact on the development of linguistic methodology. His work helped to establish linguistics as a scientific discipline, with a focus on rigorous data collection and analysis.

 Bloomfield published his *Language* in 1933, in which he argued that linguistics needs to be more objective if it is to become a real scientific discipline. He believed that the main target of linguistic inquiry should be observable phenomena, rather than abstract [cognitive](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cognition) processes. He thus advocated for the establishment of exact descriptive methods through which the use of linguistics could be elevated to the level of a positive discipline.

 Overall, Bloomfield's contributions to linguistics have been significant and far-reaching, and his ideas have had a profound impact on our understanding of language and how it works.