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# Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages

## Franz Boas

### I. RACE AND LANGUAGE

#### Early Attempts to Determine the Position of the American Race

When Columbus started on his journey to reach the Indies, sailing westward, and discovered the shores of America, he beheld a new race of man, different in type, different in culture, different in language, from any known before that time. This race resembled neither the European types, nor the negroes, nor the better-known races of southern Asia. As the Spanish conquest of America progressed, other peoples of our continent became known to the invaders, and all showed a certain degree of outer resemblance, which led the Spaniards to designate them by the term "Indios" (Indians), the inhabitants of the country which was believed to be part of India. Thus the mistaken geographical term came to be applied to the inhabitants of the New World; and owing to the contrast of their appearance to that of other races, and the peculiarities of their cultures and their languages, they came to be in time considered as a racial unit.

The same point of view still prevailed when the discoveries included more extended parts of the New World. The people with whom the Spaniards and Portuguese came into contact in South America, as well as the inhabitants of the northern parts of North America, all seemed to partake so much of the same characteristics, that they were readily classed with the natives first discovered, and were considered as a single race of mankind.

It was only when our knowledge of the Indian tribes increased, that differences between the various types of man inhabiting our continent became known. Differences in degree of culture, as well as differences in language, were recognized at an early time. Much later came a recognition of the fact that the Indians of our continent differ in type as much among themselves as do the members of other races.

As soon as investigators began to concern themselves with these questions, the problem of the position of the natives of America among the races of

mankind came to be of considerable interest, and speculations in regard to their origin and relationships occur even in the early descriptions of the New World.

Among the earlier attempts we find particularly endeavors to prove that certain parts of the beliefs and customs of the Indians agree with those of the Old World. Such agreements were considered proof that the Indians belong to one of the races enumerated in biblical history; and the theory that they represent the lost tribes of Israel was propounded frequently, and has held its own for a long time. In a similar way were traced analogies between the languages of the New World and those of the Old World, and many investigators believe even now that they have established such relationships. Attempts were also made to prove similarities in appearance between the American races and other races, and thus to determine their position among the races of the Old World.

### Classifications based on Physical Type, Language, and Customs

The problems involved in the determination of the relations of the various races have been approached from two different points of view—either the attempt has been made to assign a definite position to a race in a classificatory system of the races of man, or the history of the race has been traced as far back as available data may permit.

The attempts to classify mankind are numerous. Setting aside the classifications based on biblical tradition, and considering only those that are based on scientific discussion, we find a number of attempts based on comparisons of the anatomical characteristics of mankind, combined with geographical considerations; others are based on the discussion of a combination of anatomical and cultural characteristics—traits which are considered as characteristic of certain groups of mankind; while still others are based primarily on the study of the languages spoken by people representing a certain anatomical type.

The attempts that have thus been made have led to entirely different results. Blumenback, one of the first scientists who attempted to classify mankind, first distinguished five races—the Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. It is fairly clear that this Classification is based as much on geographical as on anatomical considerations, although the description of each race is primarily an anatomical one. Cuvier distinguished three races—the white, yellow, and black. Huxley proceeds more strictly on a biological basis. He combines part of the Mongolian and American races of Blumenback into one, assigns part of the South Asiatic peoples to the Australian type, and subdivides the European races into a dark and a light division. The numerical preponderance of the European types has evidently led him to make finer distinctions in this race, which he divides into the xanthochroic and melanochroic races. It would be easy to make subdivisions of equal value in other

races. Still clearer is the influence of cultural points of view in classifications like those of Gobineau and Klemm (who distinguishes the active and passive races), according to the cultural achievements of the various types of man.

The most typical attempt to classify mankind from a consideration of both anatomical and linguistic points of view is that of Friederich Muller, who takes as the basis of his primary divisions the form of hair, while all the minor divisions are based on linguistic considerations.

### Relations between Physical Type, Language, and Customs

An attempt to correlate the numerous classifications that have been proposed shows clearly a condition of utter confusion and contradiction. If it were true that anatomical form, language, and culture are all closely associated, and that each subdivision of mankind is characterized by a certain bodily form, a certain culture, and a certain language, which can never become separated, we might expect that the results of the various investigations would show better agreement. If, on the other hand, the various phenomena which were made the leading points in the attempt at classification are not closely associated, then we may naturally expect such contradictions and lack of agreement as are actually found.

It is therefore necessary, first of all, to be clear in regard to the significance of anatomical characteristics, language, and culture, as characteristic of any subdivision of mankind.

It seems desirable to consider the actual development of these various traits among the existing races.

### Permanence of Physical Type: Changes in Language and Culture

At the present period we may observe many cases in which a complete change of language and culture takes place without a corresponding change in physical type. This is true, for instance, among the North American negroes, a people by descent largely African; in culture and language, however, essentially European. While it is true that certain survivals of African culture and language are found among our American negroes, their culture is essentially that of the uneducated classes of the people among whom they live, and their language is on the whole identical with that of their neighbors—English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, according to the prevalent language in various parts of the continent. It might be objected that the transportation of the African race to America was an artificial one, and that in earlier times extended migrations and transplantations of this kind have not taken place.

The history of medieval Europe, however, shows clearly that extended changes in language and culture have taken place many times without corresponding changes in blood.

Recent investigations of the physical types of Europe have shown with

great clearness that the distribution of types has remained the same for a long period. Without considering details, it may be said that an Alpine type can easily be distinguished from a north-European type on the one hand, and a south-European type on the other. The Alpine type appears fairly uniform over a large territory; no matter what language may be spoken and what national culture may prevail in the particular district. The central-European Frenchman, Germans, Italians, and Slavs are so nearly of the same type that we may safely assume a considerable degree of blood relationship, notwithstanding their linguistic differences.

Instances of similar kind, in which we find permanence of blood with far-reaching modifications of language and culture, are found in other parts of the world. As an example may be mentioned the Veddah of Ceylon, a people fundamentally different in type from the neighboring Singhalese, whose language they seem to have adopted, and from whom they have also evidently borrowed a number of cultural traits. Still other examples are the Japanese of the northern part of Japan, who are undoubtedly, to a considerable extent, Aina in blood; and the Yakaghir of Siberia, who, while retaining to a great extent the old blood, have been assimilated in culture and language by the neighboring Tungus.

### Permanence of Language; Changes of Physical Type

While it is therefore evident that in many cases a people, without undergoing a considerable change in type by mixture, have changed completely their language and culture, still other cases may be adduced in which it can be shown that a people have retained their language while undergoing material changes in blood and culture, or in both. As an example of this may be mentioned the Magyar of Europe, who have retained their old language, but have become mixed with people speaking Indo-European languages, and who have, to all intents and purposes, adopted European culture.

Similar conditions must have prevailed among the Athapascans, one of the great linguistic families of North America. The great body of people speaking languages belonging to this linguistic stock live in the northwestern part of America, while other dialects are spoken by small tribes in California, and still others by a large body of people in Arizona and New Mexico. The relationship between all these dialects is so close that they must be considered as branches of one large group, and it must be assumed that all of them have sprung from a language once spoken over a continuous area. At the present time the people speaking these languages differ fundamentally in type, the inhabitants of the Mackenzie river region being quite different from the tribes of California, and these, again, differing from the tribes of New Mexico. The forms of culture in these different regions are also quite distinct; the culture of the California Athapascans resembles that of other Californian tribes, while the culture of the Athapascans of New Mexico and Arizona is influenced by that of other peoples of that area. It seems most plausible to assume in this case

that branches of this stock migrated from one part of this large area to another, where they intermingled with the neighboring people, and thus changed their physical characteristics, while at the same time they retained their speech. Without historical evidence this process can not, of course, be proved. I shall refer to this example later on.

### Changes of Language and Type

These two phenomena—a retention of type with a change of language, and a retention of language with a change of type—apparently opposed to each other, are still very closely related, and in many cases go hand in hand. An example of this is, for instance, the distribution of the Arabs along the north coast of Africa. On the whole, the Arab element has retained its language; but at the same time intermarriages with the native races were common, so that the descendants of the Arabs have often retained the old language and have changed their type. On the other hand, the natives have to a certain extent given up their own languages, but have continued to intermarry among themselves and have thus preserved their type. So far as any change of this kind is connected with intermixture, both types of changes must always occur at the same time, and will be classed as a change of type or a change of language, as our attention is directed to the one people or the other, or, in some cases, as the one or the other change is more pronounced. Cases of complete assimilation without any mixture of the people involved seem to be rare, if not entirely absent.

### Permanence of Type and Language; Change of Culture

Cases of permanence of type and language and of change of culture are much more numerous. As a matter of fact, the whole historical development of Europe, from prehistoric times on, is one endless series of examples of this process, which seems to be much easier, since assimilation of cultures occurs everywhere without actual blood mixture, as an effect of imitation. Proof of diffusion of cultural elements may be found in every single cultural area which covers a district in which many languages are spoken. In North America, California offers a good example of this kind; for here many languages are spoken, and there is a certain degree of differentiation of type, but at the same time a considerable uniformity of culture prevails. Another case in point is the coast of New Guinea, where, notwithstanding strong local differentiations, a certain fairly characteristic type of culture prevails, which goes hand in hand with a strong differentiation of languages. Among more highly civilized peoples, the whole area which is under the influence of Chinese culture might be given as an example.

These considerations make it fairly clear that, at least at the present time, anatomical type, language, and culture have not necessarily the same fates; that a people may remain constant in type and language and change in culture;

that they may remain constant in type, but change in language; or that they may remain constant in language and change in type and culture. If this is true, then it is obvious that attempts to classify mankind, based on the present distribution of type, language, and culture, must lead to different results, according to the point of view taken; that a classification based primarily on type alone will lead to a system which represents, more or less accurately, the blood relationships of the people, which do not need to coincide with their cultural relationships; and that, in the same way, classifications based on language and culture do not need at all to coincide with a biological classification.

If this be true, then a problem like the much discussed Aryan problem really does not exist, because the problem is primarily a linguistic one, relating to the history of the Aryan languages; and the assumption that a certain definite people whose members have always been related by blood must have been the carriers of this language throughout history; and the other assumption, that a certain cultural type must have always belonged to this people—are purely arbitrary ones and not in accord with the observed facts.

### Hypothesis of Original Correlation of Type, Language, and Culture

Nevertheless, it must be granted, that in a theoretical consideration of the history of the types of mankind, or languages, and of cultures, we are led back to the assumption of early conditions during which each type was much more isolated from the rest of mankind than it is at the present time. For this reason, the culture and the language belonging to a single type must have been much more sharply separated from those of other types than we find them to be at the present period. It is true that such a condition has nowhere been observed; but the knowledge of historical developments almost compels us to assume its existence at a very early period in the development of mankind. If this is true, the question would arise, whether an isolated group, at an early period, was necessarily characterized by a single type, a single language, and a single culture, or whether in such a group different types, different languages, and different cultures may have been represented.

The historical development of mankind would afford a simpler and clearer picture, if we were justified in assuming that in primitive communities the three phenomena had been intimately associated. No proof, however, of such an assumption can be given. On the contrary, the present distribution of languages, as compared with the distribution of types, makes it plausible that even at the earliest times the biological units may have been wider than the linguistic units, and presumably also wider than the cultural units. I believe that it may be safely said that all over the world the biological unit is much larger than the linguistic unit: in other words, that groups of men who are so closely related in bodily appearance that we must consider them as representatives of the same

variety of mankind, embrace a much larger number of individuals than the number of men speaking languages which we know to be genetically related. Examples of this kind may be given from many parts of the world. Thus, the European race—including under this term roughly all those individuals who are without hesitation classed by us as members of the white race—would include peoples speaking Indo-European, Basque, and Ural-Altai languages. West African negroes would represent individuals of a certain negro type, but speaking the most diverse languages; and the same would be true, among Asiatic types, of Siberians; among American types, of part of the Californian Indians.

So far as our historical evidence goes, there is no reason to believe that the number of distinct languages has at any time been less than it is now. On the contrary, all our evidence goes to show that the number of apparently unrelated languages has been much greater in earlier times than at present. On the other hand, the number of types that have presumably become extinct seems to be rather small, so that there is no reason to suppose that at an early period there should have been a nearer correspondence between the number of distinct linguistic and anatomical types; and we are thus led to the conclusion that presumably, at an early time, each human type may have existed in a number of small isolated groups, each of which may have possessed a language and culture of its own.

However this may be, the probabilities are decidedly in favor of the assumption that there is no necessity to assume that originally each language and culture were confined to a single type, or that each type and culture were confined to one language: in short, that there has been at any time a close correlation between these three phenomena.

The assumption that type, language, and culture were originally closely correlated would entail the further assumption that these three traits developed approximately at the same period, and that they developed conjointly for a considerable length of time. This assumption does not seem by any means plausible. The fundamental types of man which are represented in the negroid race and in the mongoloid race must have been differentiated long before the formation of those forms of speech that are now recognized in the linguistic families of the world. I think that even the differentiation of the more important subdivisions of the great races antedates the formation of the existing linguistic families. At any rate, the biological differentiation and the formation of speech were, at this early period, subject to the same causes that are acting upon them now, and our whole experience shows that these causes act much more rapidly on language than on the human body. In this consideration lies the principal reason for the theory of lack of correlation of type and language, even during the period of formation of types and of linguistic families.

What is true of language is obviously even more true of culture. In other words, if a certain type of man migrated over a considerable area before its language assumed the form which can now be traced in related linguistic

groups, and before its culture assumed the definite type the further development of which can now be recognized, there would be no possibility of ever discovering a correlation of type, language, and culture, even if it had ever existed; but it is quite possible that such correlation has really never occurred.

It is quite conceivable that a certain racial type may have scattered over a considerable area during a formative period of speech, and that the languages which developed among the various groups of this racial type came to be so different that it is now impossible to prove them to be genetically related. In the same way, new developments of culture may have taken place which are so entirely disconnected with older types that the older genetic relationships, even if they existed, can no longer be discovered.

If we adopt this point of view, and thus eliminate the hypothetical assumption of correlation between primitive type, primitive language, and primitive culture, we recognize that any attempt at classification which includes more than one of these traits can not be consistent.

It may be added that the general term "culture" which has been used here may be subdivided from a considerable number of points of view, and different results again might be expected when we consider the inventions, the types of social organization, or beliefs, as leading points of view in our classification.

#### Artificial Character of All Classifications of Mankind

We recognize thus that every classification of mankind must be more or less artificial, according to the point of view selected, and here, even more than in the domain of biology, we find that classification can only be a substitute for the genesis and history of the now existing types.

Thus we recognize that the essential object in comparing different types of man must be the reconstruction of the history of the development of their types, their languages, and their cultures. The history of each of these various traits is subject to a distinct set of modifying causes, and the investigation of each may be expected to contribute data toward the solution of our problem. The biological investigation may reveal the blood-relationships of types and their modifications under social and geographical environment. The linguistic investigation may disclose the history of languages, the contact of the people speaking them with other people, and the causes that led to linguistic differentiation and integration; while the history of civilization deals with the contact of a people with neighboring peoples, as well as with the history of its own achievements.



#### IV. LINGUISTICS AND ETHNOLOGY

It seems desirable to say a few words on the function of linguistic researches in the study of the ethnography of the Indians.

#### Practical Need of Linguistic Studies for Ethnological Purposes

First of all, the purely practical aspect of this question may be considered. Ordinarily, the investigator who visits an Indian tribe is not able to converse with the natives themselves and to obtain his information first-hand, but he is obliged to rely more or less on data transmitted by interpreters, or at least by the help of interpreters. He may ask his question through an interpreter, and receive again through his mouth the answer given by the Indians. It is obvious that this is an unsatisfactory method, even when the interpreters are good; but, as a rule, the available men are either not sufficiently familiar with the English language, or they are so entirely out of sympathy with the Indian point of view, and understand the need of accuracy on the part of the investigator so little, that information furnished by them can be used only with a considerable degree of caution. At the present time it is possible to get along in many parts of America without interpreters, by means of the trade-jargons that have developed everywhere in the intercourse between the whites and the Indians. These, however, are also a very unsatisfactory means of inquiring into the customs of the natives because, in some cases, the vocabulary of the trade-languages is extremely limited, and it is almost impossible to convey information relating to the religious and philosophic ideas or to the higher aspects of native art, all of which play so important a part in Indian life. Another difficulty which often develops whenever the investigator works with a particularly intelligent interpreter is that the interpreter imbibes too readily the view of the investigator, and that his information, for this reason, is strongly biased, because he is not so well able to withstand the influence of formative theories as the trained investigator ought to be. Anyone who has carried on work with intelligent Indians will recall instances of this kind, where the interpreter may have formulated a theory based on the questions that have been put through him, and has interpreted his answers under the guidance of his preconceived notions. All this is so obvious that it hardly requires a full discussion. Our needs become particularly apparent when we compare the methods that we expect from any investigator of cultures of the Old World with those of the ethnologist who is studying primitive tribes. Nobody would expect authoritative accounts of the civilization of China or of Japan from a man who does not speak the languages readily, and who has not mastered their literatures. The student of antiquity is expected to have a thorough mastery of the ancient languages. A student of Mohammedan life in Arabia or Turkey would hardly be considered a serious investigator if all his knowledge had to be derived from second-hand accounts. The ethnologist, on the other hand, undertakes in the majority of cases to elucidate the innermost thoughts and feelings of a people without so much as a smattering of knowledge of their language.

It is true that the American ethnologist is confronted with a serious practical difficulty, for, in the present state of American society, by far the greater

number of customs and practices have gone out of existence, and the investigator is compelled to rely upon accounts of customs of former times recorded from the mouths of the old generation who, when young, still took part in these performances. Added to this he is confronted with the difficulty that the number of trained investigators is very small, and the number of American languages that are mutually unintelligible exceedingly large, probably exceeding three hundred in number. Our investigating ethnologists are also denied opportunity to spend long continuous periods with any particular tribe, so that the practical difficulties in the way of acquiring languages are almost insuperable. Nevertheless, we must insist that a command of the language is an indispensable means of obtaining accurate and thorough knowledge, because much information can be gained by listening to conversations of the natives and by taking part in their daily life, which, to the observer who has no command of the language, will remain entirely inaccessible.

It must be admitted that this ideal aim is, under present conditions, entirely beyond our reach. It is, however, quite possible for the ethnographer to obtain a theoretical knowledge of native languages that will enable him to collect at least part of the information that could be best obtained by a practical knowledge of the language. Fortunately, the Indian is easily misled, by the ability of the observer to read his language, into thinking that he is also able to understand what he reads. Thus, in taking down tales or other records in the native language, and reading them to the Indians, the Indian always believes that the reader also understands what he pronounces, because it is quite inconceivable to him that a person can freely utter the sentences in his language without clearly grasping their meaning. This fact facilitates the initial stages of ethnographic information in the native languages, because, on the whole, the northern Indians are eager to be put on record in regard to questions that are of supreme interest to them. If the observer is capable of grasping by a rapid analysis the significance of what is dictated to him, even without being able to express himself freely in the native language, he is in a position to obtain much information that otherwise would be entirely unobtainable. Although this is wholly a makeshift, still it puts the observer in an infinitely better position than that in which he would be without any knowledge whatever of the language. First of all, he can get the information from the Indians first-hand, without employing an interpreter, who may mislead him. Furthermore, the range of subjects on which he can get information is considerably increased, because the limitations of the linguistic knowledge of the interpreter, or those of the trade-language, are eliminated. It would seem, therefore, that under present conditions we are more or less compelled to rely upon an extended series of texts as the safest means of obtaining information from the Indians. A general review of our ethnographic literature shows clearly how much better is the information obtained by observers who have command of the language, and who are on terms of intimate friendship with the natives, than that obtained through the medium of interpreters.

The best material we possess is perhaps contained in the naive outpourings

of the Eskimo, which they write and print themselves, and distribute as a newspaper, intended to inform the people of all the events that are of interest. These used to contain much mythological matter and much that related to the mode of life of the people. Other material of similar character is furnished by the large text collections of the Ponca, published by the late James Owen Dorsey; although many of these are influenced by the changed conditions under which the people now live. Some older records on the Iroquois, written by prominent members of the tribe, also deserve attention; and among the most recent literature the descriptions of the Sauk and Fox by Dr. William Jones are remarkable on account of the thorough understanding that the author has reached, owing to his mastery of the language. Similar in character, although rendered entirely in English, are the observations of Mr. James Teit on the Thompson Indians.

In some cases it has been possible to interest educated natives in the study of their own tribes and to induce them to write down in their own language their observations. These, also, are much superior to English records, in which the natives are generally hampered by the lack of mastery of the foreign language. While in all these cases a collector thoroughly familiar with the Indian language and with English might give us the results of his studies without using the native language in his publications, this is quite indispensable when we try to investigate the deeper problems of ethnology. A few examples will show clearly what is meant. When the question arises, for instance, of investigating the poetry of the Indians, no translation can possibly be considered as an adequate substitute for the original. The form of rhythm, the treatment of the language, the adjustment of text to music, the imagery, the use of metaphors, and all the numerous problems involved in any thorough investigation of the style of poetry, can be interpreted only by the investigator who has equal command of the ethnographical traits of the tribe and of their language. The same is true in the investigation of rituals, with their set, more or less poetic phrases, or in the investigation of prayers and incantations. The oratory of the Indians, a subject that has received much attention by ethnologists, is not adequately known, because only a very few speeches have been handed down in the original. Here, also, an accurate investigation of the method of composition and of the devices used to reach oratorical effect, requires the preservation of speeches as rendered in the original language.

There are also numerous other features of the life of the Indians which can not be adequately presented without linguistic investigation. To these belong, for instance, the discussion of personal, tribal, and local names. The translations of Indian names which are popularly known—like Sitting-Bull, Afraid-Of-His-Horse, etc.—indicate that names possess a deeper significance. The translations, however, are so difficult that a thorough linguistic knowledge is required in order to explain the significance adequately.

In all the subjects mentioned heretofore, a knowledge of Indian languages serves as an important adjunct to a full understanding of the customs and beliefs of the people whom we are studying. But in all these cases the service which language lends us is first of all a practical one—a means to a clearer

understanding of ethnological phenomena which in themselves have nothing to do with linguistic problems.

## THEORETICAL IMPORTANCE OF LINGUISTIC STUDIES

### Language a Part of Ethnological Phenomena in General

It seems, however, that a theoretical study of Indian languages is not less important than a practical knowledge of them; that the purely linguistic inquiry is part and parcel of a thorough investigation of the psychology of the peoples of the world. If ethnology is understood as the science dealing with the mental phenomena of the life of the peoples of the world, human language, one of the most important manifestations of mental life, would seem to belong naturally to the field of work of ethnology, unless special reasons can be adduced why it should not be so considered. It is true that a practical reason of this kind exists, namely, the specialization which has taken place in the methods of philological research, which has progressed to such an extent that philology and comparative linguistics are sciences which require the utmost attention, and do not allow the student to devote much of his time to other fields that require different methods of study. This, however, is no reason for believing that the results of linguistic inquiry are unimportant to the ethnologist. There are other fields of ethnological investigation which have come to be more or less specialized, and which require for their successful treatment peculiar specialization. This is true, for instance, of the study of primitive music, of primitive art, and, to a certain extent, of primitive law. Nevertheless, these subjects continue to form an important part of ethnological science.

If the phenomena of human speech seem to form in a way a subject by itself, this is perhaps largely due to the fact that the laws of language remain entirely unknown to the speakers, that linguistic phenomena never rise into the consciousness of primitive man, while all other ethnological phenomena are more or less clearly subjects of conscious thought.

The question of the relation of linguistic phenomena to ethnological phenomena, in the narrower sense of the term, deserves, therefore, special discussion.

### Language and Thought

First of all, it may be well to discuss the relation between language and thought. It has been claimed that the conciseness and clearness of thought of a people depend to a great extent upon their language. The ease with which in our modern European languages we express wide abstract ideas by a single term, and the facility with which wide generalizations are cast into the frame of a simple sentence, have been claimed to be one of the fundamental conditions of the clearness of our concepts, the logical force of our thought, and the precision

with which we eliminate in our thoughts irrelevant details. Apparently this view has much in its favor. When we compare modern English with some of those Indian languages which are most concrete in their formative expression, the contrast is striking. When we say *The eye is the organ of sight*, the Indian may not be able to form the expression *the eye*, but may have to define that the eye of a person or an animal is meant. Neither may the Indian be able to generalize readily the abstract idea of an eye as the representative of the whole class of objects, but may have to specialize by an expression like *this eye here*. Neither may he be able to express by a single term the idea of *organ*, but may have to specify it by an expression like *instrument of seeing*, so the whole sentence might assume a form like *An indefinite person's eye is his means of seeing*. Still, it will be recognized that in this more specific form the general idea may be well expressed. It seems very questionable in how far the restriction of the use of certain grammatical forms can really be conceived as a hindrance in the formulation of generalized ideas. It seems much more likely that the lack of these forms is due to the lack of their need. Primitive man, when conversing with his fellow-man, is not in the habit of discussing abstract ideas. His interests center around the occupations of his daily life; and where philosophic problems are touched upon, they appear either in relation to definite individuals or in the more or less anthropomorphic forms of religious beliefs. Discourses on qualities without connection with the object to which the qualities belong, or of activities or states disconnected from the idea of the actor or the subject being in a certain state, will hardly occur in primitive speech. Thus the Indian will not speak of goodness as such, although he may very well speak of the goodness of a person. He will not speak of a state of bliss apart from the person who is in such a state. He will not refer to the power of seeing without designating an individual who has such power. Thus it happens that in languages in which the idea of possession is expressed by elements subordinated to nouns, all abstract terms appear always with possessive elements. It is, however, perfectly conceivable that an Indian trained in philosophic thought would proceed to free the underlying nominal forms from the possessive elements, and thus reach abstract forms strictly corresponding to the abstract forms of our modern languages. I have made this experiment, for instance, with the Kwakiutl language of Vancouver Island, in which no abstract term ever occurs without its possessive elements. After some discussion, I found it perfectly easy to develop the idea of the abstract term in the mind of the Indian, who will state that the word without a possessive pronoun gives a sense, although it is not used idiomatically. I succeeded, for instance, in this manner, in isolating the terms for *love* and *pity*, which ordinarily occur only in possessive forms, like *his love for him* or *my pity for you*. That this view is correct may also be observed in languages in which possessive elements appear as independent forms, as, for instance, in the Siouan languages. In these, pure abstract terms are quite common.

There is also evidence that other specializing elements, which are so characteristic of many Indian languages, may be dispensed with when, for one reason

or another, it seems desirable to generalize a term. To use the example of the Kwakiutl language, the idea to be seated is almost always expressed with an inseparable suffix expressing the place in which a person is seated, as *seated on the floor of the house, on the ground, on the beach, on a pile of things, or on a round thing*, etc. When, however, for some reason, the idea of the state of sitting is to be emphasized, a form may be used which expresses simply *being in a sitting posture*. In this case, also, the device for generalized expression is present, but the opportunity for its application arises seldom, or perhaps never. I think what is true in these cases is true of the structure of every single language. The fact that generalized forms of expression are not used does not prove inability to form them, but it merely proves that the mode of life of the people is such that they are not required; that they would, however, develop just as soon as needed.

This point of view is also corroborated by a study of the numeral systems of primitive languages. As is well known, many languages exist in which the numerals do not exceed two or three. It has been inferred from this that the people speaking these languages are not capable of forming the concept of higher numbers. I think this interpretation of the existing conditions is quite erroneous. People like the South American Indians (among whom these defective numeral systems are found), or like the Eskimo (whose old system of five numerals probably did not exceed ten), are presumably not in need of higher numerical expressions, because there are not many objects that they have to count. On the other hand, just as soon as these same people find themselves in contact with civilization, and when they acquire standards of value that have to be counted, they adopt with perfect ease higher numerals from other languages and develop a more or less perfect system of counting. This does not mean that every individual who in the course of his life has never made use of higher numerals would acquire more complex systems readily, but the tribe as a whole seems always to be capable of adjusting itself to the needs of counting. It must be borne in mind that counting does not become necessary until objects are considered in such generalized form that their individualities are entirely lost sight of. For this reason it is possible that even a person who has a flock of domesticated animals may know them by name and by their characteristics without ever desiring to count them. Members of a war expedition may be known by name and may not be counted. In short, there is no proof that the lack of the use of numerals is in any way connected with the inability to form the concepts of higher numbers.

If we want to form a correct judgement of the influence that language exerts over thought, we ought to bear in mind that our European languages as found at the present time have been moulded to a great extent by the abstract thought of philosophers. Terms like *essence* and *existence*, many of which are now commonly used, are by origin artificial devices for expressing the results of abstract thought. In this they would resemble the artificial, unidiomatic abstract terms that may be formed in primitive languages.

Thus it would seem that the obstacles to generalized thought inherent in the

form of a language are of minor importance only, and that presumably the language alone would not prevent a people from advancing to more generalized forms of thinking if the general state of their culture should require expression of such thought; that under these conditions the language would be moulded rather by the cultural state. It does not seem likely, therefore, that there is any direct relation between the culture of a tribe and the language they speak, except in so far as the form of the language will be moulded by the state of culture, but not in so far as a certain state of culture is conditioned by morphological traits of the language.

### Unconscious Character of Linguistic Phenomena

Of greater positive importance is the question of the relation of the unconscious character of linguistic phenomena to the more conscious ethnological phenomena. It seems to my mind that this contrast is only apparent, and that the very fact of the unconsciousness of linguistic processes helps us to gain a clearer understanding of the ethnological phenomena, a point the importance of which can not be underrated. It has been mentioned before that in all languages certain classifications of concepts occur. To mention only a few: we find objects classified according to sex, or as animate and inanimate, or according to form. We find actions determined according to time and place, etc. The behavior of primitive man makes it perfectly clear that all these concepts, although they are in constant use, have never risen into consciousness, and that consequently their origin must be sought, not in rational, but in entirely unconscious, we may perhaps say instinctive, processes of the mind. They must be due to a grouping of sense-impressions and of concepts which is not in any sense of the term voluntary, but which develops from quite different psychological causes. It would seem that the essential difference between linguistic phenomena and other ethnological phenomena is that the linguistic classifications never rise into consciousness, while in other ethnological phenomena, although the same unconscious origin prevails, these often rise into consciousness, and thus give rise to secondary reasoning and to reinterpretations. It would, for instance, seem very plausible that the fundamental religious notions—like the idea of the voluntary power of inanimate objects, or of the anthropomorphic character of animals, or of the existence of powers that are superior to the mental and physical powers of man—are in their origin just as little conscious as are the fundamental ideas of language. While, however, the use of language is so automatic that the opportunity never arises for the fundamental notions to emerge into consciousness, this happens very frequently in all phenomena relating to religion. It would seem that there is no tribe in the world in which the religious activities have not come to be a subject of thought. While the religious activities may have been performed before the reason for performing them had become a subject of thought, they attained at an early time such importance that man asked himself the reason why he performed these actions. With this moment speculation in regard to religious activities



arose, and the whole series of secondary explanations which form so vast a field of ethnological phenomena came into existence.

It is difficult to give a definite proof of the unconscious origin of ethnic phenomena, because so many of them are, or have come to be, subjects of thought. The best evidence that can be given for their unconscious origin must be taken from our own experience, and I think it is not difficult to show that certain groups of our activities, whatever the history of their earlier development may have been, develop at present in each individual and in the whole people entirely sub-consciously, and nevertheless are most potent in the formation of our opinions and actions. Simple examples of this kind are actions which we consider as proper and improper, and which may be found in great numbers in what we call good manners. Thus table manners, which on the whole are impressed vigorously upon the child while it is still young, have a very fixed form. Smacking of the lips and bringing the plate up to the mouth would not be tolerated, although no esthetic or other reason could be given for their rigid exclusion; and it is instructive to know that among a tribe like the Omaha it is considered as bad taste, when invited to eat, not to smack one's lips, because this is a sign of appreciation of the meal. I think it will readily be recognized that the simple fact that these habits are customary, while others are not, is sufficient reason for eliminating those acts that are not customary, and that the idea of propriety simply arises from the continuity and automatic repetition of these acts, which brings about the notion that manners contrary to custom are unusual, and therefore not the proper manners. It may be observed in this connection that bad manners are always accompanied by rather intense feelings of displeasure, the psychological reason for which can be found only in the fact that the actions in question are contrary to those which have become habitual. It is fairly evident that in our table manners this strong feeling of propriety is associated with the familiar modes of eating. When a new kind of food is presented, the proper manner of eating which is not known, practically any habit that is not in absolute conflict with the common habits may readily establish itself.

The example of table manners gives also a fairly good instance of secondary explanation. It is not customary to bring the knife to the mouth, and very readily the feeling arises, that the knife is not used in this manner because in eating thus one would easily cut the lips. The lateness of the invention of the fork, and the fact that in many countries dull knives are used and that a similar danger exists of pricking the tongue or the lips with the sharp-pointed steel fork which is commonly used in Europe, show readily that this explanation is only a secondary rationalistic attempt to explain a custom that otherwise would remain unexplained.

If we are to draw a parallel to linguistic phenomena in this case, it would appear that the grouping of a number of unrelated actions in one group, for the reason that they cause a feeling of disgust, is brought about without any reasoning, and still sets off these actions clearly and definitely in a group by themselves.

On account of the importance of this question, it seems desirable to give another example, and one that seems to be more deeply seated than the one given before. A case of this kind is presented in the group of acts which we characterize as modest. It requires very little thought to see that, while the feelings of modesty are fundamental, the particular acts which are considered modest or immodest show immense variation, and are determined entirely by habits that develop unconsciously so far as their relation to modesty is concerned, and which may have their ultimate origin in causes of an entirely different character. A study of the history of costume proves at once that at different times and in different parts of the world it has been considered immodest to bare certain parts of the body. What parts of the body these are, is to a great extent a matter of accident. Even at the present time, and within a rather narrow range, great variations in this respect may be found. Examples are the use of the veil in Turkey, the more or less rigid use of the glove in our own society, and the difference between street costume and evening dress. A lady in full evening dress in a streetcar, during the daytime, would hardly appear in place.

We all are at once conscious of the intensity of these feelings of modesty, and of the extreme repugnance of the individual to any act that goes counter to the customary concepts of modesty. In a number of cases the origin of a costume can readily be traced, and in its development no considerations of modesty exert any influence. It is therefore evident that in this respect the grouping-together of certain customs again develops entirely unconsciously, but that, nevertheless, they stand out as a group set apart from others with great clearness as soon as our attention is directed toward the feelings of modesty.

To draw a parallel again between this ethnological phenomenon and linguistic phenomena, it would seem that the common feature of both is the grouping-together of a considerable number of activities under the form of a single idea, without the necessity of this idea itself entering into consciousness. The difference, again, would lie in the fact that the idea of modesty is easily isolated from other concepts, and that then secondary explanations are given of what is considered modest and what not. I believe that the unconscious formation of these categories is one of the fundamental traits of ethnic life, and that it even manifests itself in many of its more complex aspects; that many of our religious views and activities, of our ethical concepts, and even our scientific view, which are apparently based entirely on conscious reasoning, are affected by this tendency of distinct activities to associate themselves under the influence of strong emotions. It has been recognized before that this is one of the fundamental causes of error and of the diversity of opinion.

It seems necessary to dwell upon the analogy of ethnology and language in this respect, because, if we adopt this point of view, language seems to be one of the most instructive fields of inquiry in an investigation of the formulation of the fundamental ethnic ideas. The great advantage that linguistics offer in this respect is the fact that, on the whole, the categories which are formed always remain unconscious, and that for this reason the processes which lead to

their formation can be followed without the misleading and disturbing factors of secondary explanations, which are so common in ethnology, so much so that they generally obscure the real history of the development of ideas entirely.

Cases are rare in which a people have begun to speculate about linguistic categories, and these speculations are almost always so clearly affected by the faulty reasoning that has led to secondary explanations, that they are readily recognized as such, and can not disturb the clear view of the history of linguistic processes. In America we find this tendency, for instance, among the Pawnee, who seem to have been led to several of their religious opinions by linguistic similarities. Incidentally such cases occur also in other languages, as, for instance, in Chinook mythology, where the Culture Hero discovers a man in a canoe who obtains fish by dancing, and tells him that he must not do so, but must catch fish with the net, a tale which is entirely based on the identity of the two words for *dancing*, and *catching with a net*. These are cases which show that Max Muller's theory of the influence of etymology upon religious concepts explains some of the religious phenomena, although, of course, it can be held to account for only a very small portion.

Judging the importance of linguistic studies from this point of view, it seems well worth while to subject the whole range of linguistic concepts to a searching analysis, and to seek in the peculiarities of the grouping of ideas in different languages an important characteristic in the history of the mental development of the various branches of mankind. From this point of view, the occurrence of the most fundamental grammatical concepts in all languages must be considered as proof of the unity of fundamental psychological processes. The characteristic groupings of concepts in American languages will be treated more fully in the discussion of the single linguistic stocks. The ethnological significance of these studies lies in the clear definition of the groupings of ideas which are brought out by the objective study of language.

There is still another theoretical aspect that deserves special attention. When we try to think at all clearly, we think, on the whole, in words; and it is well known that, even in the advancement of science, inaccuracy of vocabulary has often been a stumbling block which has made it difficult to reach accurate conclusions. The same words may be used with different significance, and by assuming the word to have the same significance always, erroneous conclusions may be reached. It may also be that the word expresses only part of an idea, so that owing to its use the full range of the subject-matter discussed may not be recognized. In the same manner the words may be too wide in their significance, including a number of distinct ideas the differences of which in the course of the development of the language were not recognized. Furthermore we find that, among more primitive tribes, similarities of sound are misunderstood, and that ideas expressed by similar words are considered as similar or identical, and that descriptive terms are misunderstood as expressing an identity, or at least close relationship, between the object described and the group of ideas contained in the description.

All these traits of human thought, which are known to influence the history

of science and which play a more or less important role in the general history of civilization, occur with equal frequency in the thoughts of primitive man. It will be sufficient to give a few examples of these cases.

One of the most common cases of a group of views due to failure to notice that the same word may signify diverse objects, is that based on the belief of the identity of persons bearing the same name. Generally the interpretation is given that a child receives the name of an ancestor because he is believed to be a re-incarnation of the individuality of the ancestor. It seems, however, much more likely that this is not the real reason for the view connected with this custom, which seems due to the fact that no distinction is made between the name and the personality known under the name. The association established between name and individual is so close that the two seem almost inseparable; and when a name is mentioned, not only the name itself, but also the personality of its bearer, appears before the mind of the speaker.

Inferences based on peculiar forms of classification of ideas, and due to the fact that a whole group of distinct ideas are expressed by a single term, occur commonly in the terms of relationship of various languages; as, for instance, in our term *uncle*, which means the two distinct classes of father's brother and mother's brother. Here, also, it is commonly assumed that the linguistic expression is a secondary reflex of the customs of the people; but the question is quite often open in how far the one phenomenon is the primary one and the other the secondary one, and whether the customs of the people have not rather developed from the unconsciously developed terminology.

Cases in which the similarity of sound of words is reflected in the views of the people are not rare, and examples of these have been given before in referring to Max Muller's theory of the origin of religions.

Finally, a few examples may be given of cases in which the use of descriptive terms for certain concepts, or the metaphorical use of terms, has led to peculiar views or customs. It seems plausible to my mind, for instance, that the terms of relationship by which some of the eastern Indian tribes designate one another were originally nothing but a metaphorical use of these terms, and that the further elaboration of the social relations of the tribes may have been largely determined by transferring the ideas accompanying these terms into practice.

More convincing are examples taken from the use of metaphorical terms in poetry, which, in rituals, are taken literally, and are made the basis of certain rites. I am inclined to believe, for instance, that the frequently occurring image of the *devouring of wealth* has a close relation to the detailed form of the winter ritual among the Indians of the North Pacific coast, and that the poetical simile in which the chief is called the *support of the sky* has to a certain extent been taken literally in the elaboration of mythological ideas.

Thus it appears that from practical, as well as from theoretical, points of view, the study of language must be considered as one of the most important branches of ethnological study, because, on the one hand, a thorough insight into ethnology can not be gained without practical knowledge of language, and,

on the other hand, the fundamental concepts illustrated by human languages are not distinct in kind from ethnological phenomena; and because, furthermore, the peculiar characteristics of languages are clearly reflected in the views and customs of the peoples of the world.

## The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society

Edward Sapir

We may seem to be guilty of a paradox when we speak of the unconscious in reference to social activity. Doubtful as is the usefulness of this concept when we confine ourselves to the behavior of the individual, it may seem to be worse than doubtful when we leave the kinds of behavior that are strictly individual and deal with those more complex kinds of activity which, rightly or wrongly, are supposed to be carried on, not by individuals as such, but by the associations of human beings that constitute society. It may be argued that society has no more of an unconscious than it has hands or legs.

I propose to show, however, that the paradox is a real one only if the term "social behavior" is understood in the very literal sense of behavior referred to groups of human beings which act as such, regardless of the mentalities of the individuals which compose the groups. To such a mystical group alone can a mysterious "social unconsciousness" be ascribed. But as we are very far from believing that such groups really exist, we may be able to persuade ourselves that no more especial kind of unconsciousness need be imputed to social behavior than is needed to understand the behavior of the individual himself. We shall be on much safer ground if we take it for granted that all human behavior involves essentially the same types of mental functioning, as well conscious as unconscious, and that the term "social" is no more exclusive of the concept "unconscious" than is the term "individual," for the very simple reason that the terms "social" and "individual" are contrastive in only a limited sense. We will assume that any kind of psychology that explains the behavior of the individual also explains the behavior of society in so far as the psychological point of view is applicable to and sufficient for the study of social behavior. It is true that for certain purposes it is very useful to look away entirely from the individual and to think of socialized behavior as though it were carried on by certain larger entities which transcend the psycho-physical organism. But this viewpoint implicitly demands the abandonment of the psychological approach to the explanation of human conduct in society.

It will be clear from what we have said that we do not find the essential difference between individual and social behavior to lie in the psychology of the behavior itself. Strictly speaking, each kind of behavior is individual, the difference in terminology being entirely due to a difference in the point of view.