A Comparison Between Two Leading Linguistic Figures: Bloomfield and Firth

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Abstract—This article is dedicated to making the comparison and contrast of Bloomfield and Firth, the two leading linguistic figures of the same age. Bloomfield regarded language as a series of stimuli and responses and emphasized the objective description of language structures, while neglecting the study of meaning. On the contrary, Firth proceeded from the sociological perspective and regarded language as a social process and a means of social life, believing that meaning is the core of language study. Based on the comparative study of Bloomfield's and Firth's linguistic theories，an analysis is made in terms of different bases of philosophical theories, linguistic attitudes, attitudes toward context, toward the role of semantic research, toward the scientificalness of language study and different language teaching methods deriving from these two linguistic schools. After the analysis of the above-mentioned aspects, we can get a clear idea of their respective contributions to linguistics as well as their limitations and can reasonably make use of their theories and relevant methods in foreign language teaching context.

Keywords—Bloomfield; Firth; linguistics; behaviorism; context

I. INTRODUCTION

In the course of western linguistics development, both structuralist linguistics school (including descriptive linguistic school) and London linguistic school have had great influence, and they are both unique and have their own characteristics. As two leading figures of the same age, Leonard Bloomfield and John Rupert Firth were both most catching in the academic circle. The following paragraphs will make a comparative study of them.

II. DIFFERENT BASIS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES

In the 1920s, J. B. Watson led a psychological revolution and replaced behaviorism with Mentalism. He held that any knowledge acquisition should rely on direct experience and any feelings or impressions count for nothing. Although both Bloomfield and Firth were opposed to Mentalism, the former completely took in the opinion of behaviorism while the latter was partially influenced by it and set out to establish his own theories. Affected by the New Grammarian School and Saussure, Bloomfield developed Franz Boas' theory. Yet different from them, he accepted the prevailing behaviorist view of psychology. In the view of behaviorism, human beings' speech behaviors are the same as those of any organism, which can be explained clearly by the description of reaction to a stimulus in a specific context. And the context mentioned here mainly refers to the objective facts that can be observed, stimuli and responses, etc [1]. In his book On Languages, he used the Stimulus-Response theory of Watson's behavioristic psychology to explain speech acts and put forth a famous formula: S-r…s-R, in which S refers to the outside real stimulus, r refers to the language response, s the language stimulus and R the outside real response. That is to say, man can respond to two kinds of stimuli: real stimulus and language stimulus. Thus Bloomfield considered language as a behavior which can be explained by the S-r…s-R formula and used Behaviorism to make a mechanical description of language[2].

As a scientific research, Bloomfield's behavioristic approach has its own redeeming features, for it advocates empiricism and insists that only those phenomena that can be seen by different people can be used to prove and disprove some theories. In this sense, behaviorism can supply reliable basis for linguistic researches. However, there are obvious limitations for this formula. First, it excludes intuition from the materials and believes such things as intuition only belong to a single person and can't be perceived or judged by other people. As a result, the scope of materials is greatly confined. Secondly, it intermingles linguistic signs and speech acts and meanwhile confuses concrete speech acts with discourse.

Likewise, Firth was also opposed to Mentalism. He objected to such windy opinions as "language exists in common people's mind". He pointed out that if we believe language to have expressive function. What this means is that language is the way to express the inner world. Since we have little knowledge about the inner world, even when we are trying hard to introspect, language issues would be more mysterious if we resort to those unperceivable inner activities. However, if we treat language as behaviors, events or habits, we would confine the research target to objective things of human collective life [3].

Firth objected Mentalism, which believes language is genetic and innate. Nor did he fully agree with Behaviorism, which believes language is totally acquired and has nothing to do nature. He took a neutral attitude. He thus argued that the object of linguistic research is the language in real use

and the purpose for the research is to analyze the meaningful composition of the language and to establish a correspondence between lingual and non-lingual factors, because the forms of human experience determine the forms of language meaning.

III. DIFFERENT LINGUISTIC ATTITUDES

The differences in philosophy naturally determine the differences in linguistic attitudes. Language is a tool for communication and abstract thinking and used for expressing and communicating thoughts. Influenced by Saussure, Bloomfield believed language has two different aspects: parole and langue and accepted Saussure's theory that language is a semiotic system. He noted that the object of linguistic research should be this strict system of language. But in actual descriptions, he mixed the two concepts of parole and langue and used behavioristic terminology to explain language phenomena and didn't note the differences among verbal signs, discourse and behaviors.

Firth is both a tradition inheritor and also the father of new theories. On the one hand, influenced by Saussure, he believed language consists of both structure and system and those two axes form a cruciate framework. But he was against Saussure's distinction between parole and langue and also the opinion that the object of linguistic research should be the strict system of language (langue). On the other hand, influenced by the Polish anthropologist B. K. Malinowski, he persisted that we should pay attention to the sociological component while doing language researches. That's to say, Firth paid attention both to the structure and the concrete meaning in specific situation. Firth regarded language as a social process, as a means of social life, rather than simply a set of agreed-upon semiotics and signals. That is to say, on the nature of language, Firth believed that language is a kind of social phenomena. He held that in order to live, human beings have to learn and learning language is a means of participation in social activities. Language is a means of doing things and of making others do things. It is a way of behavior and life.

IV. DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS CONTEXTS

Both Bloomfield and Firth paid attention to the Contextualism theory, believing that the context or situation determines the meaning of language. However the former's analysis of contexts is superficial, rendering the context or situation to a simple description of a chain of stimuli and reactions, while the latter's contextual analysis is more direct and clear, who believed that meaning is determined by the specific situation. The practice to carry out researches about language in a certain context was first put forward by Philipp Wegener and Alan Gardiner. Yet Firth's research was much more concrete and in-depth. Firth thought a word's meaning is manifested in the context and is the function it performs in the social, cultural, spiritual and material circumstances, the circumstances formed together by things, emotions and the relationship between the speaker and listener. This kind of context consists of inner relationships and outer relationships and Firth abstracted them into several categories of concepts.

V. DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ROLE OF SEMANTIC RESEARCH

Starting from behaviorism, Bloomfield defined meaning as the situation in which the speaker gives the language forms and the response incurred on the listener's part. In fact, such a wide range of meanings cannot be studied, as the speaker's situation includes everything that may make a person open his mouth and give that concrete utterance. Also the listener's response includes all the mental activities and actual actions. Even Bloomfield himself admitted that if we seek to study the speaker's situation and the listener's response, we would need all the human knowledge. Thus, Bloomfield felt quite pessimistic about the study of semantics. In the American descriptive linguistics, because of too much emphasis on the description of forms and structures of the surveyed materials, meaning research is never set great store to, which becomes "Achilles' heel" and often becomes the target of criticism by many other linguistic schools.

Firth regarded language as a social phenomenon and a way of doing things and making others do things. Thus his study carries a much greater note of sociology. "Functions in context" become the core content of Firth's meaning theories. Based on Malinowski's theory of context, Firth established a new and unique set of meaning theories. In Firth's view, a word has its meaning just because it has certain functions, be it phonetic, grammatical, semantic or social. To make clear the meaning of a word is to see the word as a segment in the utterance stream and set the word against the environment besides the language itself. The various speeches made by a certain language community and the words occurring in these discourses have the same background. If we can tell the situations clearly we thus make the words' meanings clear.[3] That is to say, every word is a new word in a new context. The context theory, together with the limitation language theory was later developed by Halliday to become the register theory.

VI. DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SCIENTIFICNESS OF LANGUAGE STUDY

As for language study itself, both Firth and Bloomfield were for its scientificness and objectivity. But the former was quite absolute while the latter was somewhat alleviated. Bloomfield advocated enthusiastically positivism, determinism and mechanism. He believed induction is the only useful method for language research and any analysis program must be based on reliable hypothesis, which is the basic principle of his scientific approach. To make linguistics scientificalized, Bloomfield insisted that there is only one way to define the meaning of words, which is to resort to the materials already seen or probably to be seen or tested. The materials should also be those that can be seen by different people and can be accurately and objectively described, for example, the activities of nerves or muscles, or a certain kind of chemical process that is going on in our bodies, etc. And we should use strict investigation methods and description methods throughout the research, And we should not make any subjective generalization except for the actual description of materials. Bloomfield's opinion has an

obvious positivist tendency. But in so doing, Bloomfield equated the objectivity of science and methods with the things and phenomena directly perceived by people. The result is that he confined his task to just collecting corpora and classifying them, and the limitations of this theory are obvious: first of all, perception often concerns the superficial aspects and can hardly reach into the nature. Secondly, while the old materials are collected, new things occur all the time. The final result for those descriptive linguists' rushing from and to is to become "sample collectors".

Firth was opposed to the completely formulated science of language study. He once pointed out that the completely formulated language study cannot function a bit for a real experiential science, or as A. Martinet said, the research target might become dead technological language. Maybe it is only applicable to dead language and can obtain no actual effect.

On linguistic research method, Firth believed we should combine theory with experience. He advocated the use of appropriate terminology and possible technical means to analyze the actual language facts and language phenomena that can be observed. He believed we should first determine the components of language activities if we seek to do language research, explain their relations on various levels, and ultimately explicate the internal relations between these elements and human activities in the environment of language use. And finally we should apply the results to more corpus to testify the universal property. Firth's linguistics research approach is characterized by data accuracy, effectiveness and objectivity. His approach shared some similarities with Chomsky's, who insists on the hypothesis-deduction method and his research is called the evaluation process. Chomsky studies the sentence (language itself, grammatical rules and transformational rules) from the perspective of psychology based on mathematics and logic. Chomsky's method can not only describe the surface structure of a sentence, but also interpret the internal grammatical relationships within a sentence.

VII. DIFFERENT LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS DERIVING FROM THESE TWO LINGUISTIC SCHOOLS

Linguistic theory differences can directly lead to different interpretations of foreign language acquisition and different teaching methods.

Bloomfield believed the ability to use language is not genetic but acquired, which cannot be separated from the social environment and other outside factors. In his view, the process of children's language acquisition is to imitate the adult world triggered by external stimuli. The language acquisition is the forming of language habits. Correct language habits will be reinforced positively, and the incorrect language habits reinforced negatively [4]. Firth was also aware of the influence of the environment on people. Unlike Bloomfield, he didn't believe language is totally acquired. Nor did he think language is totally innate and genetic. In his view, language is both genetic and acquired. He believes that language is a natural tendency.

By learning and engaging in social activities, people can master the social traditions, so as to master the language system [5].

Under the guidance of Structuralism theory the Audio-Lingual approach came into being in the United States. This teaching method lays emphasis on listening and speaking while neglecting reading and writing. It advocates the use of a lot of mechanical exercises to speed up and consolidate the habit-forming and fully embodies the Stimulus-Response-Reinforcement process [6]. This teaching method once produced good teaching effects. In spite of the popularity of some other language teaching approaches later, the Audio-Lingual approach based on Bloomfield's linguistic theories still plays an important role in today's foreign language teaching. Britain began to advocate the Oral Approach under the influence of Firth's London linguistic school in the 1930s, and in the 1950s it was renamed Situation Language Teaching, which emphasizes pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, advocates the teaching of language structure in a sentence and the choice of words according to the sentence, highlights the importance of meaning, context and situation in language communication [6]. This approach is still prevalent in foreign language teaching today.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Both Bloomfield and Firth had their unique opinions towards linguistics and once made great contributions to linguistic development. Nonetheless each has his own limitations. Bloomfield summed up the language as a series of stimuli and responses, but the actual language mechanism is far more complex than his behaviorism could impossibly explain. Firth's theory also has insurmountable limitations. Not all the speech acts have direct link with the environment. The context or situation can only narrow the semantic range, with the last semantic choice resting on the individual. In spite of the extreme parlance and obscurity in his books, which are often the target of criticism by other linguists, he still had done a great deal to the establishment of British linguistics and some of his opinions have great revelatory impact on the world's linguistics development. With the emerging of new linguistic theories and linguists, the boom time of Bloomfield and Firth is gone forever, but we cannot forget and deny their great contributions to linguistics and to language teaching. With the Audio-Lingual approach and Situation Language Teaching approach still enjoying their popularity in some parts of China, we can get a glimpse of their powerful and lasting impact. To sum up, the comparative study of these two great linguistic figures of the same age has tremendous realistic significance.

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