

## Unit two: American structuralism

### Lesson 06: PRINCIPLES of AMERICAN STRUCTURALISM

American and European structuralism shared a number of features. In insisting upon the necessity of treating each language as a more or less coherent and integrated system, both European and American linguists of this period tended to emphasize, if not to exaggerate, the structural uniqueness of individual languages. Structuralism proposes a Collective term for a number of linguistic approaches in the first half of the twentieth century, all based on the work of F. de Saussure, but strongly divergent from one another. While 'structuralism' in its narrower sense refers to de Saussure's linguistic theories, in its broader sense it is an umbrella term for approaches in anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism, which - in analogy to linguistic structuralism - concentrate on synchronic analysis rather than on genetic / historical preconditions, in order to expose the universal structures at work under the surface of social relations.

American linguists, like their contemporaries in Europe, were all influenced by the structuralist views of Saussure. It had become evident among linguists that:

- Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive.
- Spoken language should also be studied.
- Language is structured and self-contained.
- Language is a system (of signs)
- Relation between form and meaning is arbitrary.
- Study of languages is synchronic.

#### Features of American Structuralism

1. Influence of behaviourist psychology
2. Study procedures
3. Focus on American Indian languages
4. Corpus-based analyses
5. Descriptive (taxonomic) linguistics