

Selected Writings of
Edward Sapir
*in Language, Culture
and Personality*

EDITED BY DAVID G. MANDELBAUM

New Foreword by David G. Mandelbaum

Epilogue by Dell H. Hymes

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FOREWORD TO PAPERBACK EDITION

IN THE CENTENARY YEAR of Edward Sapir's birth, 1984, the continuing interest in his work and the vitality of his ideas was shown in commemorative meetings and by the many papers presented at them. Sessions devoted to Sapir were held at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, the Canadian Ethnological Society, the Linguistic Society of America and, in 1985, the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The centerpiece of these meetings was a three-day conference on the life and work of Edward Sapir, which was held at the Victoria Memorial Museum in Ottawa, where Sapir had worked from 1910 to 1925.

One book that appeared in the centenary year, the forerunner of several to come, is *Edward Sapir: Appraisals of His Life and Work*, edited by and with an introduction by Konrad Koerner (John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia 1984). It contains reprints of biographical and obituary notices, comments and appraisals of Sapir's work. It also includes an updated bibliography of posthumous publications. An editorial board is at work on the project to collect and publish all of Sapir's scientific and scholarly writings in a number of volumes.

While some of Sapir's former students participated in the commemorative meetings and contributed papers, the great majority of participants and contributors are of a generation who did not know Sapir as a magnetic teacher and stimulating person, but know well the value of his thought and the attraction of his writings. More than a few among the succeeding generation of linguists and anthropologists have taken Sapir as an intellectual ancestor. An epilogue to this volume has been written by Dell Hymes, who is of a later generation and is a distinguished linguist, anthropologist, and student of American Indian life.

One can learn a good deal about a person or a community by studying the ancestors they choose to remember and how they honor their legacy. Linguists who take Sapir as an intellectual forebear do so partly because of his model of technical proficiency, and also the felicity of his writing style. They do so in large part because of his appreciation of language as an integral part of all human culture and society, not as a world unto itself. He thought of language as an essential ingredient of humanity and as a dynamic force in being human.

Among the cultural-social anthropologists who count Sapir as one of their forebears, some, mainly specialists in American Indian studies, do so because of his methods and insights concerning the historical development of American Indian cultures. Other anthropologists find that Sapir's writings on culture and personality are still among the best delineations of that important, knotty field. Beyond the professionals of these disciplines, there are the many students and general readers who come upon one or another of his broad-perspective pieces and get intellectual reward and pleasure from Sapir's persuasive, lucid presentations on such subjects of perennial interest as language, culture change, and personality.

Sapir has now become an historic figure in the annals of American linguistics and anthropology. Some historians of these disciplines tend to lay out the eminent contributors by schools, each school neatly demarcated within its rectangle. Sapir's work is particularly unsuited to such classifications. He ranged too sidely, wrote on too broad a spectrum of subjects to fit well into such taxonomies of intellectual history. The reader does best to go directly to Sapir's writings and thought. Over the decades, many readers have found it well worth doing.

The present edition reproduces the materials of the original, 1949 edition with the addition of a new foreword and epilogue. I thank James Nyce, Konrad Koerner and Philip Sapir for their help in noting some typographical errors in the original edition and for bibliographical references. Yakov Malkiel and Victor Golla made useful suggestions for this edition. Philip Sapir has responded helpfully to requests concerning a variety of matters.

Near the end of my introduction to the original edition, I note that the stimulus of Sapir's life and work will continue to enliven many of his students and associates for a long time to come. We can now say that this stimulus has also been experienced by several succeeding generations of readers.

D.G.M.

Berkeley

September 1985

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

EDWARD SAPIR was one of those rare men among scientists and scholars who are spoken of by their colleagues in terms of genius. The papers selected for this volume give only part of the reason for that judgment, for there was an uncommon quality of the man himself which attracted and stimulated—inspired may not be too strong a word—many of those who knew him.

His talents were manifest in many fields, in none more brilliantly and effectively than in linguistics. He had a truly phenomenal knowledge of languages; linguists have commented that his command of the facts, of specific linguistic phenomena, was unsurpassed among linguistic scientists. Sapir began his linguistic studies in the field of Germanics while he was still an undergraduate. Early in his graduate work he undertook the recording and analysis of an American Indian language, Takelma, and throughout his professional career he carried on intensive work within the various families of American Indian languages. When a speaker of the West African language Jabo (Gweabo) was found working in a Chicago bowling alley, Sapir availed himself of the opportunity to extend his linguistic knowledge of the African field. In later years, his interests turned again to problems in the Indo-European group and he found time to continue work on languages of the Sinitic and Semitic stocks as well.

In all his work on these diverse tongues, Sapir showed a sure grasp of the basic form and the interlocking elements of the structure of each language. The Sanskrit scholar, Franklin Edgerton, has put it thus: "He seemed able to meet every one of us on our own grounds, to see the minutiae of many provinces as with a magnifying glass, and at the same time effortlessly to survey the whole terrain."¹ And his ability to view the whole scope of language extended beyond the sheerly formal aspects of speech. Formal linguistic descriptions and analyses were, for Sapir, only the beginning of the linguist's task. For he understood

¹ The references in this introduction, except where otherwise noted, are to obituary notices written by the following authors and listed in order of reference: Franklin Edgerton in *Year Book of the American Philosophical Society* (1939), pp. 460-464; Franz Boas in *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 10: 58-63; Morris Swadesh in *Language*, 15 (1940): 132-135; Ruth Benedict in *American Anthropologist*, 41 (1939): 465-477; Diamond Jenness in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 33 (1939): 151-153; E. A. Hooton in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 74: 157-159; Leslie Spier in *Science*, 89 (1939): 237-238; Louis Hjelmslev in *Acta Linguistica*, 1 (1939), 76-77; Leslie Spier in *Man*, 39 (1939): 92-93.

linguistics as a social science, and every language as one aspect of a whole culture. In his writing and teaching he stressed the importance of dealing with the phenomena of language in the culture context, of studying speech in its social setting.

Sapir's field work among American Indian tribes was done primarily to collect data for linguistic study, but it also furnished material for papers which dealt with the tribal cultures. In ethnology as in linguistics, Sapir had a way of illuminating an array of factual data with felicitous theoretical insights. Some of his earlier writings in American Indian ethnology, particularly the *Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture*, have become classics in that they are read by most students professionally interested in anthropology.

As he developed his thinking concerning the processes of culture growth, Sapir came increasingly to deal with fundamental problems of culture theory. In a number of the papers written in his mature years, his insight into cultures generally is brought to bear on the problems of our culture. His examining of the outer facets and inner forces of contemporary life was accompanied by two developing interests: one had to do with semantics, particularly the semantics of English; the other, with the interplay between culture and personality. His writings in the latter field especially have had important influence.

The same sensitivity to nuances of language and custom, the same feeling for form which made Sapir so gifted a scholar, enabled him to write poetry. The extensive list of his published poems which appears at the end of this volume is but one indication of Sapir as an artist, for his aesthetic gifts shone through all his writing and his teaching. A linguist once remarked that, for him, Sapir's analysis of the Navaho word for corn was an artistic masterpiece. And in less recondite fields as well, Sapir's works have savored of aesthetic as well as intellectual accomplishments.

At one period, mainly during his years at Ottawa, he was a frequent contributor of musical and literary criticism to such journals as *The Dial*, *The Nation*, and *The Musical Quarterly*. An able pianist himself, and one who had tried his hand at musical composition, he was able to write about a work of music with an understanding which encompassed the variant meanings for composer, for performer, and for listener.

His literary criticism is marked by a rare depth and discernment. His acumen clove clean to the heart of a piece of writing, nor would he be distracted by new phrasings or unfamiliar trappings. Thus he was one of the first to herald the influence which the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins was to have. His critiques of scientific writing are

no less keen, and are equally appreciative of fresh approaches. Sapir's reviews of some of the early psychoanalytic writings may still serve to sum up the anthropologist's appraisal of the Freudian concepts.

His own scientific contributions, in every field of his endeavor, are marked by a freshness and an originality that bespeak the intellectual vigor and intuition that he possessed. And he was capable of documenting his intuitive insights with a broad control of factual data. Not all were so documented, for the flashes of his vision sometimes extended beyond the frontiers of fully controlled data. Hence some of his writing is programmatic and pioneering rather than definitive. But always, even in his slighter papers, there is cognizance of basic form and fundamental meanings, and not infrequently a reader has felt that Sapir has opened whole new vistas of knowledge for him.

It may be too soon to assess the real impress of Sapir's work on the course of linguistics and anthropology, but a number of his fellow scholars have attested the influence of his ideas. Just two such comments may be cited. One is by his teacher, Franz Boas, who noted that the strictures of the phonetic method and the general adoption of phonemic principles in the study of primitive languages are largely due to him. And treating of another field, Clyde Kluckhohn says that the tough insights which Sapir drew from psychiatry not only forced a basic reconstruction of anthropological postulates but led to new types of specifically pointed field work.² Not a few of his colleagues and students are still following through the research leads which Sapir first indicated to them.

Sapir was born in Lauenburg, Germany, on January 26, 1884. When he was five years old his parents migrated to the United States, where his father, Jacob Sapir, carried on his profession of cantor. Edward Sapir's abilities found early recognition, for he won scholarships at Horace Mann School and then a four-year Pulitzer fellowship to Columbia College, where he was graduated in 1904. He went on to do graduate work at Columbia and took a Master's degree in Germanics. About this time he came to know Franz Boas and, as Morris Swadesh has written, came away from a conference with Boas impressed that he had everything to learn about language. For every generalization he had before believed was certain and exceptionless, Boas could summon indubitable contrary examples from American Indian languages he knew. Sapir was stirred by the prospect of studying living languages through the recording and analysis of the dialects of native speakers. Hence at the end of

² In *One Hundred Years of American Psychiatry*, J. K. Hall, gen. ed. (New York, 1944), p. 601.

his first year of graduate work he went to the state of Washington to study the language of the Wishram Indians. In the following year he journeyed to Oregon to work on the Takelma language, the grammar of which he presented as his doctoral dissertation. His first papers, published while he was in his early twenties, are no apprentice fumbblings, but models of clarity and keen analysis.

For a year, 1907-1908, he was research associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, and worked on the language of the Yana Indians. His stay in Berkeley remained a favorite memory, a period of concentrated achievement and pleasant associations. He then went to the University of Pennsylvania for two years, first as fellow and then as instructor. In 1909 he was awarded the Ph.D. by Columbia. The Museum of the University of Pennsylvania sponsored his field trips to the Ute Indians, and arranged to have a Paiute student, Tony Tillohash, from the Indian school at Carlisle, work with Sapir in Philadelphia as linguistic informant. Although the Paiute materials did not receive full publication until 1930, papers based on them appeared earlier and formed significant advances in the comparative American Indian linguistics.

In 1910 he went to Ottawa as chief of the newly created Division of Anthropology in the Geological Survey of the Canadian National Museum. In the same year he married Florence Delson, and his three children of this marriage, Michael, Helen, and Philip, were born in Ottawa. Sapir's fifteen years in Canada were somewhat dulled by isolation from the men of science and scholarship with whom he had most in common, but they did provide ample opportunity for field work with Indian tribes. It was during this period that he did his major work with the Nootka of Vancouver Island; he began his long study of the Athapascan languages with the Sarcee of Alberta; Tlingit, Kutchin, and Ingalik were some of the other languages of the Indians of Canada that he recorded. In addition to his intensive work with Canadian Indians, he found energy for several diverse projects. With the secretary of the Chinese legation in Ottawa he worked out a study of Chinese humor and folklore. He translated and transcribed many French-Canadian folk songs, some of which were published in a volume with the collaboration of Marius Barbeau. He gave a course on English literature before a local Ottawa society. Music and literature were his chief relaxation; the greater part of his poetry and musical studies was done during this period.

When a call to the University of Chicago came in 1925, he was glad to accept. His wife had died shortly before, after a long illness, and he

had become restless in Ottawa. And the post at Chicago at last gave ample scope for the exercise of his talents. Ruth Benedict has written that the position at Chicago was one he was uniquely qualified to adorn. He attracted graduate students in linguistics whom he could train in the rigorous methods he had developed. And students in ethnology were drawn to him as well. His field work was continued with trips to the Hupa and Navaho. He was in great demand to speak to groups of all kinds outside the university. Within two years of his arrival he was promoted to the rank of Professor of Anthropology and General Linguistics. Honors and recognition came in quick succession, and it has been said that at this period Sapir was easily one of the most influential figures in American anthropology.

Sapir's six years at Chicago were happy ones. He married Jean McClenaghan in 1926 and their first son, Paul, was born there. Their second son, David, was born in New Haven, where Sapir had accepted a Sterling Professorship in Anthropology and Linguistics at Yale.

The call to Yale in 1931 was a most attractive one. The terms of the appointment were so favorable that Sapir was able at once to set up one of the great centers of anthropological and linguistic work in the country. In 1932-1933 he gathered a unique seminar of foreign students holding scholarships from the Rockefeller Foundation to study the impact of culture on personality.

His years at Yale were strenuous ones. Administrative duties and scientific responsibilities made demands on him while his adventurous mind was ranging ever farther into new fields and deeper into those with which he was long familiar. A series of heart attacks in 1937 and 1938 brought him under a doctor's regimen of quiet and a slower pace, but his intellectual enthusiasms would not be contained by the restraint which his physical condition demanded. He died of the ailment on February 4, 1939.

It is no difficult task to give the measure of the man in terms of his official honors. His position at Yale, the honorary Doctor of Science degree which Columbia University awarded him in 1929, his membership in the National Academy of Sciences, his election to the office of president of the American Anthropological Association and of the Linguistic Society of America—these and his other titles bear witness that high academic distinctions were bestowed on Edward Sapir.

It is more difficult to indicate what Sapir meant to those who knew him and were his students. Listening to him could be a lucid adventure in the field of ideas; one came forth exhilarated, more than oneself. Diamond Jenness, Sapir's successor at Ottawa, relates how he once

saw Sapir enter a hall filled with tumultuous children, "... and with only three scraps of paper, one white, one yellow, one black, hold them spellbound for an hour while he discoursed, simply and clearly as only a great scholar can, on human races and their differences."

With his contemporaries, as Earnest Hooton has noted, he tended to be shy. But as soon as he felt the social atmosphere to be congenial he unfolded all his unusual personal charm and became a most brilliant and fascinating companion.

His students found in Sapir a sympathetic mentor and the kindest of men. With him they could stand high and see the subjects of their study from the panoramic view and in an integrated, synthesizing manner. For their particular scientific problems, he was ever willing to give generously of his guidance. If one of us was able to present a striking new idea or fresh and valid evidence to revise an old concept, he was always ready, even eager, to take it up and carry it forward. He had no vested intellectual interests.

Sapir had a staunch belief in human rights which led him to resent oppression and discrimination wherever they occurred. His attitude was not only the observant and analytic one of the anthropologist whose training admits him to a place in the press box of the human arena; for, in his latter years especially, he felt that a place at the observation post does not exclude one from a share in the action on the field. He became increasingly interested in Jewish affairs, lending his support to the Yiddish Scientific Institute and participating in the program of the Conference for Jewish Relations.

In conversation he would occasionally tell how profoundly Judaism had affected his life. During childhood he had rebelled against it. The interminable regulations, the blinding restrictions of orthodoxy seemed unnecessary, intolerable. But as he grew older he came more and more to appreciate the grand plan that lay beneath the irksome details. Toward the end of his life he turned to the ethnological and linguistic study of the Talmud, and in it he found both the delight of the pursuit of scholarship and invigoration of spirit.

Only small bits of his extensive studies in Semitics were ever published. Indeed, the swift inclosing of his illness and death deprived science and scholarship of the results of a number of studies which he had carried far along. Among his papers there was left a large collection of notes on Tocharian, an Indo-European language once spoken in central Asia. Jenness notes that for many years Sapir had collected materials for a study which might indicate a possible relationship between ancient Sinitic forms and old forms of the American Indian

languages which he grouped under the name Na-Dene. A magnificent collection of ethnological materials concerning the Nootka, Yana, and Hupa is mentioned by Leslie Spier. One of Sapir's major projects left uncompleted was a book which had been tentatively titled *The Psychology of Culture*, an outline for which had been submitted to his publisher. It is fortunate that some of Sapir's associates have worked with and published parts of his notes, as Harry Hoijer has done with the Navaho linguistic materials, Morris Swadesh with the Nootka texts, and Leslie Spier with the Yana ethnological observations. Still more are to be utilized for further publications.

For all the mass of unpublished studies which Sapir left, the list of his publications is no inconsiderable one. But it is, with a single exception, in the form of monographs and articles. His one general book, *Language*, was published in 1921, and Jenness tells that it was dictated in the space of two months from a few hastily jotted notes. In after years Sapir would comment that if he were to do it over, the book would contain new ideas and some of its concepts would be revised and presented in quite a different way. Such, in fact, was Sapir's attitude toward all his work. As his thinking developed, and new information or new principles required the revision of some of his earlier postulates, he saw no reason why his earlier efforts should not be modified to at-tune with advances in knowledge. Nonetheless the book remains a notable contribution to linguistic science. Thus the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev has written that, when he first read the work, it was to him a revelation and a confirmation of his own vague anticipations of establishing a comparative general linguistics that would supersede the previous kind of approach.

The present volume is intended to present, in accessible form, those of Sapir's writings which carry the gist of his thought. No passages from *Language* have been included since that book is more readily available than are most of the sources in which the journal articles originally appeared. The phonetic orthography of the linguistic papers has been reproduced as it appeared in the original version of each article. The editor is most grateful to the many colleagues and former students of Edward Sapir who were consulted and who aided in the selection of these papers, but the responsibility for the selection is the editor's alone. Special thanks are due to Mrs. Jean Sapir, who gave the editor full leeway in the preparation of this volume, and to Philip Sapir, who aided in many ways. The general bibliography was originally prepared by Leslie Spier, and the poetry bibliography was compiled by Philip Sapir; both have been slightly revised and brought up to

date by Mrs. Mary Anne Whipple, who also has been most helpful in the preparation of the manuscript.

On the opening page of each article and excerpt included in this volume there is notation of the original publisher of the piece. All appear with the permission of the original publishers; our thanks are extended to these publishers for their permissions.

A few months before Sapir's death, plans were made by his students to present him a volume of studies written in his honor. Knowing that he was seriously ill, the group decided to tell him of the plans. He responded with characteristic modesty, disclaiming any right to special honor, but expressing his pleasure and the pride he felt in his students. The volume appeared in 1941 under the title of *Language, Culture, and Personality: Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir*, and was edited by Leslie Spier, A. Irving Hallowell, and Stanley S. Newman. Those essays are an indication of the continuing vitality of Sapir's influence. An eminent psychiatrist once remarked that Sapir was an intoxicating man. That he was. And the stimulus of his life and work will continue to enliven many of his students and associates for a long time to come.

Leslie Spier has aptly noted that no life can be long enough to accomplish the program Sapir set for himself, but we can only regret that his proved so brief. Yet for all the untimely end to his career, Edward Sapir made much of his times, his talents, his opportunities; so much, indeed, that many will subscribe to Earnest Hooton's characterization of Sapir as one whose rare fineness of personality and breadth and depth of understanding shed luster upon the very title "anthropologist."

DAVID G. MANDELBAUM

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THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

Part One

LANGUAGE

The first paper which forms part of *Language and Experience* is an excellent survey of the field of linguistics. The author's paper back language, although the article is necessarily much more concise and less detailed. The main contributions of the book, such as the analysis of linguistic forms and the outline for a structural classification of languages, are excellent. But the article also deals with some of the ideas and methods which have been developed in the last few years between the publication of the book in 1957 and the appearance of the encyclopaedia article in 1977. Thus, it is one of the terms "phenomena" in the description of speech events, but it is an analysis of the possible real aspects of language, and there is contact with the matter of its experimental analysis.

The papers which have contributed significantly to the development of the phenomena approach in linguistics follow next, "S. and Patricia vs. Language" (1978), and "The Psychological Reality of Phenomena" (1979), both stress the importance of a conceptual or felt approach to understanding the elements of language, and underline the fallacy of purely linguistic or structural analyses of linguistic phenomena. The first paragraph of the former paper states that the author's purpose is "to indicate that the sounds and sound processes of speech cannot properly be understood in such strictly mechanical terms." And the same paper ends with the statement: "The discussion is an illustration of the necessity of looking behind the formal field of any type of expression in order to grasp its inherently felt and communicated forms which alone give significant meaning to the expression."

The latter, and last, of these two papers, however, begins with the thesis that no study of human experience can be defined adequately as the mechanical study or product of its physical properties. Sapir's demonstration in this paper of such examples from the phonemic systems of Navaho and Sanskrit, and the English. This article was first published in a French translation, the original version is from Sapir's personal notes.

The next paper, "A Study in Phonemic Symbolism" (1977), also deals with the sounds of speech, but does so by means of experiment, and indicates the tendency of experiments to conclude in accordance with an unconscious or intuitive logic which is not necessarily based on experience.

