
[52] *Racism in early twentieth-century American linguistics*

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'Racism', writes Barkan (1992), 'is a universal affliction'. This presentation probes the history of racism in a specific milieu: from the end of the 1800s through the first half of the twentieth century in the United States, and how it afflicted the development of what became American structuralist linguistics.

The Linguistic Society of America's 'Statement on Race', approved May 2019, is a convenient provocation. This text congratulates linguistics for having 'contributed to...empowerment of people of various racial groups'. Although it identifies residual inequality in the contemporary discipline and suggests more theoretically-sophisticated outlooks on the intersection of language and institutionalized and personally-mediated racism, the Statement takes a perspective that begins in the 1960s. Its authors evince no awareness of the history of racism or anti-racism within American linguistics, of the wider intellectual-historical factors that surrounds that history, or of paradoxes that haunt it. Among those paradoxes:

(1) Granted the stature of Franz Boas (1858–1942) as both a key figure in the development of American linguistics and as a scholar credited with undercutting the so-called 'scientific racism' of the early 1900s (Briggs 2002; Whitfield 2010; Okrent 2019), why has linguistics lagged behind other social sciences in addressing the pernicious effects of racism and in working toward disciplinary racial justice (Charity Hudley et al. in press)?

(2) 1924 was a peak year for the outbreak of public expressions of interwar anti-immigration, eugenicist, racist ideologies in the U.S. Passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in that year prevented immigration to the U.S. from Asia and set stringent quotas on the number of immigrants who would be admitted from Eastern Europe (Huber et al. 2008). Coincidentally, 1924 was also the year of the founding of the Linguistic Society of America. Of the first 12 Presidents of the LSA, four were Jewish; one Catholic; four immigrated to the U.S.; two others were children of immigrants. What role did (anti-)racism play in the founding of the Society?

(3) William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894) is identified as America's first academic linguist, and a key figure in institutionalization of the field. However, unlike both American language scholars who preceded him such as Duponceau or Pickering or the structuralists / descriptivists who followed him, Whitney discounted Native American languages. The insights of modern scholars (Valone 1996; Alter 1999) provide the necessary context to Whitney's views on race, evolution, and the nature of language.