



# LA RECONSTRUCTION

lareconstruction.fr

## Edward SAPIR

Florilège établi par Jean-Michel Fortis

Pour le séminaire *La Reconstruction*

Le 10 mai 2022

**Résumé.** — Après le curriculum vitae de Sapir (1884-1939), cet exposé se propose d'introduire à ses conceptions générales en matière linguistique, non sans faire quelques incursions ailleurs. La perspective choisie coïncide avec l'annonce programmatique du séminaire : « la restitution des conditions de genèse, de déchiffrement et d'interprétation des œuvres non seulement du passé mais du présent ». En d'autres mots, on s'efforce autant que possible de comprendre l'environnement culturel de Sapir et ses inspirations et d'esquisser par contraste ce qui fait son originalité. La tâche est vaste car les intérêts de Sapir couvrent un champ immense : en dehors de la linguistique générale et amérindienne et de l'anthropologie, il faut mentionner la psychologie (en particulier la *Gestalttheorie*) et la psychanalyse, l'esthétique, la musique et la littérature. Un lieu nodal de l'œuvre, qui tient à tous ces centres d'intérêt, est la conception esthétique que se fait Sapir de l'appréhension et de la construction des formes structurées (ou *patterns*) linguistiques et, plus généralement, culturelles. Cette conception est à situer en particulier dans le contexte de l'esthétique de l'époque, notamment la tendance formaliste. Enfin, Sapir étant peut-être principalement connu aujourd'hui pour l'hypothèse dite « de Sapir-Whorf », il semble opportun de dire deux mots de cette « hypothèse » en revenant à cet auteur bicéphale parfois fantasmé.

Jean-Michel Fortis, Université de Paris & Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, CNRS, Laboratoire d'histoire des théories linguistiques.

### **PATTERN**

#### **TEXTE 1**

"The candle-blowing sound is a physical by-product of a directly functional act, the extinguishing of the candle by means of a peculiar method of producing a current of air. So far as normal human interest is concerned, this sound serves merely as a sign of the blowing out, or attempted blowing out, itself. We can abbreviate our record of the facts a little and say that the production of the candle-blowing sound is a directly functional act. On the other hand, the articulation of the *wh*-sound in such a word as *when* has no direct functional value; it is merely a link in the construction of a symbol, the articulated or perceived word *when*, which in turn assumes a function, symbolic at that, only when it is experienced in certain linguistic contexts, such as the saying or hearing of a sentence like *When are you coming?* In brief, the candle-blowing *wh* means business; the speech sound *wh* is stored-up play which can eventually fall in line in a game that merely refers to business. Still more briefly, the former is practice; the latter, art."

“Sound Patterns in Language”, (1951[1925]: 33-34)

## TEXTE 2

“Each member of this system [i.e. of speech sounds as "symbolically utilizable counters"] is not only characterized by a distinctive and slightly variable articulation and a corresponding acoustic image, but also — *and this is crucial* — by a psychological aloofness from all the other members of the system. (...) A sound that is not unconsciously felt as ‘placed’ with reference to other sounds is no more a true element of speech than a lifting of the foot is a dance step unless it can be “placed” with reference to other movements that help to define the dance” “Sound Patterns in Language”, (1951 [1925]: 35).

## TEXTE 3

“To most of us who speak English the tangible expression of the plural idea in the noun seems to be a self-evident necessity. Careful observation of English usage, however, leads to the conviction that this self-evident necessity of expression is more of an illusion than a reality. If the plural were to be understood functionally alone, we should find it difficult to explain why we use plural forms with numerals and other words that in themselves imply plurality. ‘Five man’ or ‘several house’ would be just as adequate as ‘five men’ or ‘several houses.’ Clearly, what has happened is that English, like all of the other Indo-European languages, has developed a feeling for the classification of all expressions which have a nominal form into singulars and plurals. So much is this the case that in the early period of the history of our linguistic family even the adjective, which is nominal in form, is unusable except in conjunction with the category of number.”

“The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society”, (1951 [1927]: 550)

## TEXTE 4

Le topati nootka comme pattern culturel:

[paraphrase de Sapir: le topati a les caractéristiques générales suivantes:

1/ the topati thing is public.

2/ exhibited with an expenditure of wealth, with having a feast.

3/ A topati is the right of a lineage, not of an individual, and derives from one’s identification with a glorious ancestor. Under this privilege which are grouped the right to use certain names, songs, fishing and hunting rites, ceremonies etc.

4/ Every topati is associated with some place, with a legend referring to this association.

5/ To participate in the topati, you must have a clear title to it (descent or dowry or ceremonial gift, or by killing someone and taking one’s topati, or taking one’s territory, one’s mask etc.).

“These samples [of Nootka life involving the *topati* system] suggest that [we should see] cultural pattern always as a configuration or aesthetic form rather than merely [as a set of] specific events. There is an analogy, therefore, between working out the grammar of a language and working out the pattern of the *topati*.”

*Psychology of Culture* (2002 [1928-1937]: 118).

## PERSPECTIVE ESTHETIQUE

### TEXTE 5

“I find that what I most care for is beauty of form, whether in substance or, perhaps even more keenly, in spirit. A perfect style, a well-balanced system of philosophy, a perfect bit of music, the beauty of mathematical relations — these are some of the things that, in the sphere of the immaterial, have most deeply stirred me.”

Sapir, lettre à Lowie, 29 septembre 1916 (cité par Silverstein 1986: 79)

#### **TEXTE 6**

“Everything that we have so far seen to be true of language points to the fact that it is the most significant and colossal work that the human spirit has evolved—nothing short of a finished form of expression for all communicable experience. This form may be endlessly varied by the individual without thereby losing its distinctive contours; and it is constantly reshaping itself as is all art. Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations.”

*Language*, (1921: 234).

### **FORM-FEELING ET ESTHETIQUE**

#### **TEXTE 7**

“Probably most linguists are convinced that the language-learning process, particularly the acquisition of a feeling for the formal set of the language, is very largely unconscious and involves mechanisms that are quite distinct in character from either sensation or reflection. There is doubtless something deeper about our feeling for form than even the majority of art theorists have divined, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that, as psychological analysis becomes more refined, one of the greatest values of linguistic study will be in the unexpected light it may throw on the psychology of intuition, this “intuition” being perhaps nothing more nor less than the “feeling” for relations.”

“The Grammarian and his Language”, (1951 [1924]: 156).

#### **TEXTE 8**

“Linguistic features are necessarily less capable of rising into consciousness of speakers than traits of culture.”

“Language and Environment”, (1951 [1912]: 100).

#### **TEXTE 9**

Language “forms a far more compact and inherently unified conceptual and formal complex than the totality of culture. This is due primarily to the fact that its function is far more limited in nature, to some extent also to the fact that the disturbing force of rationalization that constantly shapes and distorts culture anew is largely absent in language.”

(Sapir 1951 [1916] : 432-3).

“Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture: A study in method”, (1951 [1916]: 432-3).

A comparer avec Boas:

#### **TEXTE 10**

“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. (...) 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 re-interpretation.”

Boas, “Introduction”, *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, 1911: 67.

#### **TEXTE 11**

“It is a matter of common experience that it is relatively easy to fix the attention on some arbitrarily selected element of experience, such as a sensation or an emotion, but that it is far from easy to become conscious of the exact place which such an element holds in the total constellation of behavior. (...) this knowledge is not capable of conscious manipulation in terms of word symbols. It is rather a very delicately nuanced feeling of subtle relations, both experienced and possible. To this kind of knowledge may be applied the term “intuition,” which, when so defined, need have no mystic connotations [P.549] whatever.”

“The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society ”, (1951 [1927]: 548-9).

### **FORME ET FUNCTION: AUTONOMISATION DE LA FORME**

#### **TEXTE 12**

“Consider, for example, verbs that are not entirely active [in their meaning but are treated as active in the linguistic structure:] in English the subject “I” is logically implied to be the active will in “I sleep” as well as “I run”. [A sentence like] “I am hungry” might, [in terms of its content, be logically] better expressed with “hunger” as the active doer, as in [the German] *mich hungert* [or even the French] *j’ai faim*. In some languages, however, such as Sioux, a rigid distinction is made between truly active and static verbs. (...) [It seems, then, that] when we get a pattern of behavior, we follow that [pattern] in spite of [being led, sometimes, into] illogical ideas or a feeling of inadequacy. We become used to it. We are comfortable in a groove of behavior. [Indeed], it seems that no matter what [the] psychological origin may be, or complex of psychological origins, or a particular type of patterned conduct, the pattern itself will linger on by sheer inertia. (...) Patterns of activity are continually getting away from their original psychological incitation.”

*Psychology of Culture* (2002 [1928-1937]: 109-110).

#### **TEXTE 13**

“Purely functional explanations of language, if valid, would lead us to expect either a far greater uniformity in linguistic expression than we actually find, or should lead us to discover strict relations of a functional nature between a particular form of language and the culture of the people using it. Neither of these expectations is fulfilled by the facts. (...) the forms of speech developed in the different parts of the world are at once free and necessary, in the sense in which all artistic productions are free and necessary. Linguistic forms as we find them bear only the loosest relation to the cultural needs of a given society, but they have the very tightest consistency as aesthetic products.”

“The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society”, (1951 [1927]: 550).

#### **TEXTE 14**

“It is usual to say that isolated linguistic responses are learned early in life and that, as these harden into fixed habits, formally analogous responses are made, when the need arises, in a purely mechanical manner, specific precedents pointing the way to new responses. We are sometimes told that these analogous responses are largely the result of reflection on the utility of the earlier ones, directly learned from the social environment. Such methods of approach see nothing in the problem of linguistic form beyond what is involved in the more and more accurate control of a certain set of muscles towards a desired end, say the hammering of a nail. I can only believe that explanations of this type are seriously incomplete and that they fail to do justice to a certain innate striving for formal elaboration and expression and to an unconscious patterning of sets of related elements of experience.”

“The Grammarian and his Language”, (1951 [1924]: 156).

#### **TEXTE 15**

Indépendance de la culture à l'égard des déterminants géographiques et des besoins

“The argument of environmental [determin]ists, like the cultural geographer Huntington, is one huge fallacy. Though it is a culture on which [environmental] influences impinge, they forget this, [declaring instead that] "America [was] destined to be agricultural" [because of its] alluvial plains. But [what about] the Amerindians, [who occupied this continent for millennia without farming those selfsame plains, even after agriculture was known to them? This interpretation of history as [environmental destiny] is naïve (...) [The reason this argument is naïve is that] the mere presence of an economic stock-in-trade, [such as alluvial plains suitable for growing wheat], is not enough: you must have [the appropriate cultural] patterns.”

*Psychology of Culture* (2002 [1928-1937]):

#### **TEXTE 16**

Convention culturelle prenant le pas sur l'efficacité de l'adaptation de l'individu à la fonction:

“When we compare primitive society with our own, we are at once impressed by the lesser importance of function as a determinant of organization. Functional groupings there are, of course, but they are subsidiary, as a rule, to kinship, territorial, and status groups. There is a very definite tendency for communal activities of all sorts to socialize on the lines suggested by these groups. Thus, among the West Coast Indians, membership in the ceremonial or secret societies, while theoretically dependent upon the acquirement of power from the initiating guardian spirits, is in reality largely a matter of privilege inhering in certain lines of descent. The Kwakiutl Cannibal Society, for instance, is not a spontaneous association of such men and women as possess unusual psychic suggestibility, but is composed of individuals who have family traditions entitling them to dance the Cannibal dance and to perform the rituals of the Society. Among the Pueblo Indians there is a marked tendency for the priesthood of important religious fraternities to be recruited from particular clans. Among the Plains tribes the policing of the camp during the annual buffalo hunt was entrusted not to a group expressly constituted for the purpose but to a series of graded age societies, each serving in turn, as among the Arapaho, to the sibs, as among the Omaha, or to some other set of social units that had other grounds for existence. We must be careful not to exaggerate the importance of facts such as these, for

undoubtedly there is much intercrossing in primitive society of the various types of social organization; yet it remains true that, by and large, function tends to wait on alien principles, particularly kinship. (...) Yet it is more than doubtful if the gradual unfolding of social patterning tends indefinitely to be controlled by function. (...) Both anthropology and history seem to show (...) that any kind of social grouping, once established, tends to persist, and that it has a life only partly conditioned by its function, which may be changed from age to age and from place to place.”

“Anthropology and Sociology”, (1951 [1927] : 341).

## “HYPOTHESE DE SAPIR-WHORF”

### SAPIR

#### TEXTE 17

“The instrument makes possible the product, the product refines the instrument. The birth of a new concept is invariably foreshadowed by a more or less strained or extended use of old linguistic material; the concept does not attain to individual and independent life until it has found a distinctive linguistic embodiment. In most cases the new symbol is but a thing wrought from linguistic material already in existence in ways mapped out by crushingly despotic precedents. As soon as the word is at hand, we instinctively feel, with something of a sigh of relief, that the concept is ours for the handling. Not until we own the symbol do we feel that we hold a key to the immediate knowledge or understanding of the concept. Would we be so ready to die for “liberty” to struggle for “ideals,” if the words themselves were not ringing within us? And the word, as we know, is not only a key ; it may also be a fetter.”

*Language*, 1921: 16-17.

#### TEXTE 18

“...it is not absurd to say that both Hottentot and Eskimo possess all the formal apparatus that is required to serve as matrix for the expression of Kant’s thought. If these languages have not the requisite Kantian vocabulary, it is not the languages that are to be blamed but the Eskimo and the Hottentots themselves.”

“The Grammarian and his Language”, (1951 [1924] : 154).

#### TEXTE 19

“...the forms of speech developed in the different parts of the world are at once free and necessary, in the sense in which all artistic productions are free and necessary. Linguistic forms as we find them bear only the loosest relation to the cultural needs of a given society, but they have the very tightest consistency as aesthetic products.”

“The Grammarian and his Language”, (1951 [1927]: 550).

#### TEXTE 20

“Just as soon as an external and purely formal aesthetic device ceases to be felt as inherently essential to sincerity of expression, it ceases to remain merely a condition of the battling for self-expression and becomes a tyrannous burden, a perfectly useless fetter.”

Sapir, "The Twilight of Rhyme", 1999 [1917]: 888.

## WHORF

### TEXTE 21

"...no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free. The person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems. We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated."

*Language, Thought and Reality*, (1956 : 213-4)

### TEXTE 22

"Whether such a civilization as ours would be possible with widely different linguistic handling of time is a large question". Whorf dit seulement que le système de mesure du temps (et des activités) est "in consonance with the patterns of the SAE languages".

*Language, Thought and Reality*, (1956 : 154)

### TEXTE 23

"What we call "scientific thought" is a specialization of the western Indo-European type of language, which has developed not only a set of different dialectics, but actually a set of different dialects. THESE DIALECTS ARE NOW BECOMING MUTUALLY UNINTELLIGIBLE. The term 'space', for instance, does not and CANNOT mean the same thing to a psychologist as to a physicist."

*Language, Thought and Reality*, (1956 : 246)

### TEXTE 24

"a noumenal world [< Ouspensky] — a world of hyperspace [< Ouspensky & Bragdon], of higher dimensions — awaits discovery by all the sciences, which it will unite and unify, awaits discovery under its first aspect of PATTERNED RELATIONS, inconceivably manifold and yet bearing a recognizable affinity to the rich and systematic organization of LANGUAGE, including *au fond* mathematics and music, which are ultimately of the same kindred as language."

*Language, Thought and Reality*, (1956 : 247-8).

## REFERENCES

- Sapir, Edward. (1951) [1912]. "Language and Environment", *American Anthropologist* 14 : 226-242. [rep. in Mandelbaum, David G. (ed.), 1951, *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture and personality*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 89-103].
- Sapir, Edward. 1951 [1916]. "Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture: A study in method", Canada, Dpt of Mines, Geological Survey, Memoir 90 (Anthropological Series n°13. Ottawa, Government Printing Bureau. [rep. in Mandelbaum, David G. (ed.), 1951, *Selected*

- writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture and personality*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 389-462].
- Sapir, Edward. 1999 [1917]. "The Twilight of Rhyme", *The Dial* 63: 98-100. [rep. in *The Collected Works of Edward Sapir* ed. by Regna Darnell et al. Vol. III: *Culture*. Berlin & New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 886-890].
- Sapir, Edward (1921) *Language. An introduction to the study of speech*, San Diego / New York / London, Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Sapir, Edward. 1951 [1924]. "The Grammarian and his Language", *American Mercury* 1, 149-55. [rep. in Mandelbaum, David G. (ed.), 1951, *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture and personality*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 150-159].
- Sapir, Edward. 1951 [1925]. "Sound patterns in language", *Language* 1, 37-51. [rep. in Mandelbaum, David G. (ed.), 1951, *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture and personality*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 33-60].
- Sapir, Edward. 1951 [1927]. "Anthropology and sociology". In Ogburn, William F. & Goldenweiser, Alexander (eds), *The social sciences and their interrelations*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, c.9, 97-11. [rep. in Mandelbaum, David G. (ed.), 1951, *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture and personality*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 332-345].
- Sapir, Edward. 1951 (1927). "The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society», Dummer, Ethel S. (ed.), *The unconscious: A symposium*, New York, Knopf, 114-142. [rep. in Mandelbaum, David G. (ed.), 1951, *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture and personality*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 544-559].
- Sapir, Edward. (2002) [1928-1937]. *The Psychology of Culture. A course of lectures*, reconstructed and edited by Judith T. Irvine, Berlin / New York, Mouton de Gruyter.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. *Language, Thought, and Reality*. Cambridge (Mass.), The M.I.T. Press.