EDWARD SAPIR

Edward Sapir died in his fifty-sixth year on February fourth. The heart condition of which he died had been diagnosed about five years before but caused serious trouble for the first time in the summer of 1937 when Sapir was in Ann Arbor teaching in the Linguistic Institute. The enthusiasm and energy which he put into his teaching and scientific discussion and his cordiality in social contact with colleagues and students sapped his strength and brought on a heart attack. During the few previous years while under a doctor's regimen of general quiet and relaxation, his intellectual enthusiasm could not be held within the restraints which his physical condition demanded.

Sapir was born in Lauenberg, Germany, January 26, 1884. When he was only four, his father, Jacob Sapir, migrated to the United States to carry on his profession of cantor. Edward Sapir early showed scholarly ability, musical sense, and literary talent, and won a four-year Pulitzer fellowship for study in Columbia University. He became interested in linguistic science and took a master's degree in Germanic. About this time he came into contact with Franz Boas, dean of American anthropologists and virtually the initiator of strict scientific method in American linguistics. Boas had a profound influence on Sapir, and particularly impressed upon him the need for a broad knowledge of languages of varying structures. He has told us how he 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 also impressed with the possibilities of inductive study of living languages by phonetic recording from native speakers. This led him into the field at least fourteen times to study such languages as Chinook (Wishram dialect), Yana (three dialects), Tlingit, Nootka, Sarcee, Kutchin, Ingalik, Hupa, Navaho, Southern Paiute. In addition, he made use of incidental opportunities to add to his first-hand knowledge of particular languages

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whenever he met a speaker of some new language. His work on Jabo of Africa was done with a native, Blooah by name, who was found by some anthropology students working in a bowling alley in Chicago. Typical of his constant desire to observe linguistic phenomena, when a Lithuanian American student once dropped into his office at Yale, he inquired about the inflectional accents and asked him to pronounce words which illustrated the contrasting types. He was then interested to note that the native Lithuanian, though he had not been aware before that there were two different ways of accenting a word, was able to recognize a difference that would hardly have been noticed by a non-native.

He also did a tremendous amount of reading. As a result of his constant interest and study, he probably had a greater knowledge of specific linguistic phenomena than ten or more ordinary linguistic scientists. We have lost this treasury of linguistic knowledge, this accumulation of facts in the mind of one man who was at the same time most competent to draw upon their theoretical significance. But he has shown the way to others, particularly to his students. He has demonstrated the value and the possibility of having a quantity of data as a basis from which to generalize and as a background for the approach to specific problems. Some will say that the faculty of retaining and being able to use so much knowledge belongs only to genius, but Sapir's attitude was that such knowledge can be coordinated under a general understanding of linguistic science. He who has a sound command of linguistic theory can retain a quantity of specific facts to support his theories and to aid him in the constant refinement of his understanding of linguistic phenomena.

Sapir's interests in cultural anthropology and in psychology were completely integrated with his interest in linguistics. He early came to see linguistics as a social science, and social science was to him completely linked with the operations of the personality. He felt that the abstraction of language science from the social setting deprived it of considerable vitality. His own mind was so capable of dialectic thinking, of keeping track of all the various factors in a situation, that he was impatient of those who approached a problem by arbitrarily ruling out consideration of certain factors. He himself set no restrictions on his thinking, but was always ready to bring in new aspects that had heuristic value.

The bibliography given in Psychiatry 1.154–7 (1938) (which does

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not include his poems) gives an indication of the breadth of his scholarship.[1] The acuity of his analysis is evident in each of them.

The whole of Sapir's spirit cannot be told in terms of scientific achievement. We must mention too his great belief in human rights. He resented oppression and discrimination against groups and violations of individual justice. As a Jew, he was keenly aware of anti-semitism in American educational institutions and resisted every official action that seemed to involve this issue. But he was not ethnocentric in his sense of social justice and fought equally hard for any individual who was unjustly treated.

Sapir took his doctor's degree in anthropology at Columbia in 1909, was a research assistant at California for a year (1907–8) and held a fellowship and an instructorship at Pennsylvania from 1908 to 1910. He then went to Ottawa to be Chief of the Division of Anthropology of the Geological Survey of Canada and held that position for fifteen years. In 1925 he went to Chicago as Associate Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics. In 1927 he became full Professor. In 1931 he went to Yale as Sterling Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics and as Chair-

[1] The wide range of his work on American Indian Languages has been summarily indicated above. From the other titles may be selected for special mention here: The Musical Foundations of Verse, JEGPh 20.213–22 (1921); Language, an Introduction to the Study of Speech, New York, 1921; The Grammarian and his Language, Am. Mercury 1.149–55 (1924); Sound Patterns in Language, LANG. 1.37–51 (1925); A Study of Phonetic Symbolism, Journ. Exper. Psych. 12.225–39 (1929); Male and Female Forms of Speech in Yana, Donum Nat. Schrijnen 79–85 (1929); The Status of Linguistics as a Science, LANG. 5.207–14 (1929); Totality, LANG. MONOGR. 6 (1930); The Concept of Phonetic Law as tested in Primitive Languages by Leonard Bloomfield, Methods in Social Science 297–306 (1931); Notes on the Gweabo Language of Liberia, LANG. 7.30–41 (1931); The Function of an International Auxiliary Language, Psyche No. 44.4–15 (1931); The Expression of the Ending-Point Relation in English, French, and German (with Morris Swadesh, edited by Alice V. Morris), LANG. MONOGR. (1931); La Réalité Psychologique des Phonèmes, Journ. de Psych. 30.247–65 (1933); Hittite *hapatis* 'vassal' and Greek ὁπᾱδος, LANG. 10.274–9 (1934); κύβδα a Karian Gloss, JAOS 56.85 (1936); Internal Linguistic Evidence suggestive of the Northern Origin of the Navaho, Am. Anthrop. n.s. 38.224–35 (1936); Hebrew *'argāz*, a Philistine Word, JAOS 56.272–81 (1936); Greek ἀτύζομαι, a Hittite Loanword, and its Relatives, LANG. 12.175–80 (1936); Tibetan Influences on Tocharian, I, LANG. 12.259–71 (1936); Hebrew 'helmet', a Loanword, and its Bearing on Indo-European Phonology, JAOS 57.73–7 (1937); Glottalized Continuants in Navaho, Nootka, and Kwakiutl (with a note on Indo-European), LANG. 14.248–74 (1938); Nootka Texts (with Morris Swadesh), Special Publications of the Linguistic Society, William Dwight Whitney Linguistic Series (1938).

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man of the newly founded Anthropology Department. He was a member, regular or honorary, of a number of anthropological and linguistic societies here and abroad; he was president of the Linguistic Society in 1933, and of the Anthropological Society in 1938. He held several other offices at different times in these societies and served on the committees of research councils, including the National Research Council and the American Indian Committee of the American Council of Learned Societies. Among the special honors conferred in recognition of his achievements were memberships in Sigma Xi, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and an honorary degree of Doctor of Science at Columbia.

He leaves a widow, Mrs. Jean McClenaghan Sapir, and five children —Herbert Michael, Helen, Philip, Paul, and David, the first three by a former marriage with Florence Delson, who died in 1924. A host of students, colleagues, and friends also mourn him. We regret the loss to descriptive and comparative linguistics and ethnology, to cultural theory, to social psychology. But more than that, we who are scientists and regard science as a thing of prime value, have it brought home to us at such a time as this how much character is worth. We regret the loss to science but feel poignant sorrow at the passing of a man who was honest and just, who sincerely respected the personal worth of all whom he had dealings with, and who had the human feeling and courage to fight against injustice and discrimination.

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