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**Primitivism in linguistics:
The Americanist tradition after Boas**

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Abstract

This talk examines the sociocultural construct of primitivism as used in the academic discourse of linguists in the Americanist tradition from Franz Boas onwards. It finds that while linguists actively engaged in normative practices meant to replace the evaluative uses of the notion of primitivism in favor of value-free and objective ones, what actually emerged from this was a new dichotomy between complexity and simplicity, one which upon closer examination can be shown to retain vestiges of the earlier opposition between primeval and modern as viewed from the perspective of evolutionary anthropology, only couched in new terminology. Linguists have since the time of Boas tried to escape this erroneous conception of races, languages, and cultures as representative of some deep point in history, by way of moralizing discourses that continually constituted new meanings for the term "primitive" by arguing for and using different conceptions of the term over time, adopted various stances in opposition to this term, and ultimately restructured the entire system of oppositions and terminology. Three practices in particular were especially prominent in constituting a culture of respect for indigenous peoples – a moralizing discourse regarding the use of the notion of primitivism; distancing oneself from claims of primitivism using various written techniques; and devoting research time and textual space to arguing for the non-primitivism of various languages.

References

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