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Primitivism in linguistics: The Americanist tradition after Boas

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Abstract

This paper examines the sociocultural construct of primitivism as used in the academic discourse of linguists in the Americanist tradition from Franz Boas onwards. Boas was the first to problematize the concept of 'primitive' when applied to languages, races, or cultures, sparking a discourse that eventually resulted in the practice among linguists and anthropologists of abandoning the term 'primitive' entirely, except when criticizing or quoting it. This trend is visible in the academic writing of anthropologists and linguists over time, with several articles explicitly contesting the notion of primitivism along the way.

The discourse on primitivism did not end there, however, but merely shifted its focus. Since Sapir's famous quip, "When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head-hunting Savage of Assam." (Sapir 1921:131), it has become a mantra among linguists that "there is no such thing as a primitive language" (this exact phrase appearing in numerous books targeted at popular audiences). The result has been an effective ban, until recently, on a related but distinct topic, that of linguistic simplicity. Linguists are now challenging this practice by suggesting that the notion of linguistic simplicity can be decoupled from the concept of primitivism, and that differences between languages in terms of linguistic complexity can be studied in an objective, non-evaluative way (Sampson, Gil & Trudgill 2009). They question the *principle of invariance of linguistic complexity* (Sampson 2009) by providing evidence for the various ways in which some languages are more or less complex than others. These linguists have reshaped the discussion of primitivism to focus on the opposition between simple and complex rather than primitive and civilized.

This paper examines the ways in which the system of oppositions in the discussion of primitivism has changed over time in this fashion. Linguists and anthropologists have 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 from an evaluative, normative approach to a value-free, objective one.

1 Introduction: Pre-Boasian Primitivism

When Franz Boas published his famous book, *The mind of primitive man* in 1911, it was in response to a growing interest in what were then termed the 'primitive peoples' of the world.

Judging by the frequency of terms like ‘primitive’, ‘primitive language’, ‘primitive culture’, and ‘primitive people’ in the Google Ngram corpus (Michel et al. 2011), this interest seems to have started around 1860 and grown until its apex in the 1930s, at which point the use of the term ‘primitive’ began to decrease steadily until today. This Pre-Boasian era saw an accompanying drastic increase in the documentation of Native American languages and cultures, and the founding of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879, which coordinated much of the anthropological work that took place in the United States in that time period. Embedded in much of this outpouring of research, however, was a fundamental belief in European racial superiority. This lens shaped the research questions of the early ethnographers, so that the study of culture was an attempt to account for the primitivism of non-European peoples (Duranti 1997:23).

The mind of primitive man was Boas’ reaction to the sociocultural construct of primitivism as practiced by the ethnographers of his time, and in particular evolutionary anthropology. Boas identifies the core of the issue in the opening pages of his work, questioning the justification for the racism inherent in earlier ethnographic research. His profound discussion is worth quoting at length, because it nicely elucidates the ideology and practice of earlier researchers in regards to primitivism:

[T]he term “primitive” has a double meaning. It applies to both bodily form and culture. We are accustomed to speak both of primitive races and primitive cultures as though the two were necessarily related. We believe not only in a close association between race and culture; we are also ready to claim superiority of our own race over all others. [...] Our aversions and judgments are not, by any means, primarily rational in character.

Nevertheless, we like to support our emotional attitude toward the so-called inferior races by reasoning. The superiority of our inventions, the extent of our scientific knowledge, the complexity of our social institutions, our attempts to promote the welfare of all members of the social body, create the impression that we, the civilized people, have advanced far beyond the stages on which other groups linger, and the assumption has arisen of an innate superiority of the European nations and of their descendants. The basis of our reasoning is obvious: the higher a civilization, the higher must be the aptitude for civilization; and as aptitude presumably depends upon the perfection of the mechanism of body and mind, we infer that the White race represents the highest type. The tacit assumption is made that achievement depends solely, or at least primarily, upon innate racial ability. Since the intellectual development of the White race is the highest, it is assumed that its intellectuality is supreme and that its mind has the most subtle organization. [...]

The object of our inquiry is therefore an attempt to clear up the racial and cultural problems involved in these questions. Our globe is inhabited by many races, and a great diversity of cultural forms exists. [sic] The term “primitive” should not be applied indiscriminately to bodily build and to culture as though both belonged together by necessity. It is rather one of the fundamental questions to be investigated whether the cultural character of a race is determined by its physical characteristics. The term race itself should be clearly understood before this question can be answered. If a close relation between race and culture should be shown to exist it would be necessary to study for each racial group separately the interaction between bodily build and mental and social life. If it should be proved not to exist, it will be permissible to treat mankind as a whole and to study cultural types regardless of race. (Boas:3-4, 17-18)

2 Boasian Primitivism

It is important to note that what Boas did *not* suggest in his work was a wholesale rejection of the concept of primitivism. His major aim instead was to show that race, culture, and language are not inherently linked, and were analytically distinct entities. In adopting this approach, the term ‘primitive’ began to take on new oppositions, so that it became possible for a people to be viewed as primitive along one dimension but civilized, sophisticated, or complex along another. Going by the Google Ngram data for the phrase ‘primitive language’, it would seem his book had the desired effect, so that even while the use of the term ‘primitive’ was increasing drastically, the appellation ‘primitive language’ was on the wane. This era was likely the origin of the deeply entrenched idea that there is no such thing as a primitive language.

However, the very title of Boas’ book, *The mind of primitive man*, suggests that he did see primitivism as an apposite description of many indigenous societies if not languages. When Boas states that “the term “primitive” should not be applied indiscriminately to bodily build and to culture as though both belonged together by necessity”, his objection is to the idea that one can, by virtue of observing cultural primitivism among a people, therefore assume that people exhibits racial/physiological or linguistic primitivism as well; his objection is not to the use of the term in general. Boas continued to use the term unquestioningly in phrases like “primitive tribes” until at least as late as his 1940 book, *Race, language and culture*.

Thus it should hardly come as a surprise that the notion of cultural primitivism still features prominently in the earliest issues of the *International Journal of American Linguistics (IJAL)*, co-founded by Boas and Pliny Earle Goddard in 1917, with contributions from like-minded contemporaries and students including Leo J. Frachtenberg, Alfred L. Kroeber, Edward Sapir, and John R. Swanton. What then constituted “primitive culture” for these early Boasians? How was this sociocultural construct defined in the wake of Boas’ criticisms?

Two uses predominate in the first decade of articles in *IJAL*: a historical sense of ‘early, original, historic’, and a linguistic sense of ‘grammatically basic’. In the case of grammatical primitivism, it is clear from the context that no implications regarding the general primitivity of the language or culture are intended:¹

“As long as we are not better informed as to the exact distribution of types of pronominal classification and as to the historical drifts inferred from comparative linguistic research, it is premature to talk of certain features as **primitive**, of others as secondary.” (Sapir 1917:85)

“[...] these roots belong to the most **primitive** part of the vocabulary [...]” (de Jong 1920:311)

Both of these examples are in fact marginally ambiguous with the second sense of “primitive”, meaning ‘original’ or ‘historic’. This is by far the most common use of the term in the first decade of *IJAL*, and typically the least ambiguous, as the contrast with ‘later’ in the first example shows:

“The conditions favoring such phonetic influence must have been much more numerous in **primitive** America than they were in the **later** development of European languages.” (Boas 1917:3)

“in the present state of our knowledge of **primitive** languages, it is not safe to disregard the possibility of a complex **origin** of linguistic groups” (Boas 1917:4)

“[Uhlenbeck] looks upon the passive conception of the logically transitive or active verb as belonging to a particularly **primitive stage of linguistic evolution**. [...] In other words, he believes that the passive verb as fundamental concept belongs to the same group of **antique linguistic phenomena** as, say, grammatical gender.” (Sapir 1917:82)

“Il est à espérer qu'avec les nouveaux documents que nous publions ici, on pourra rattacher à cette souche très **primitive des langues considérées comme formant des familles isolées**.” [“It is to be hoped that with the new documents that we publish here, we will tie together this very **primitive strain of languages [formerly] considered to be isolated families**.”; author’s translation] (Rivet, Kok & Tastevin 1925:143)

The historical sense of “primitive” is so strong that one sees it used where today we would use the term “Proto-”:

“Blackfoot, in most cases, seems to have **preserved Primitive-Algonquian t**” (Uhlenbeck 1925:236)

¹ In all the quotations given in this paper, any use of **bold** is my added emphasis, while *italics* is that of the original.

Finally, this passage by Speck (1918:187) makes it clear that these uses of the term 'primitive' were not intended to be derogatory:

In the versions of eastern Indian myths given by the authors, there is, however, an undertone of untrue if not inferior reconception, which takes away the smack of originality that every reader feels the true examples of native oral literature should possess. This is unfortunately the case with all the hitherto published material from this region. Without exception, it has been interpreted and rendered in an altered form. Irresponsibility for **the intrinsic worth of the original** must pass by before **primitive literature** is free to make its own appeal to the interest of students.

Here, even though Speck uses the term 'primitive' to refer to indigenous literature, he does so as part of an appeal to let such literature speak for itself, as something that has worth, rather than interpret it in light of European ideals. Cases like this make it clear that 'primitive' is being used in what writers intended to be a technical, non-derogatory sense.

Embedded in this conception of primitivism is a vestige of the earlier evolutionary anthropology approach that views some cultures as more evolved than others. This is most clearly illustrated in the following passage by de Angulo & Freeland (1930:78).

One point which is of interest in the relation of language in general to culture is that the Achumawi represent **one of the most primitive stages of human culture, - fully as low as any that have yet been recorded**. As will be shown in the present study, their language is fully as complex in forms as Latin is.

This passage is also an excellent example of how primitivism in one area (technological complexity) could now be divorced from primitivism in another (linguistic complexity).

This evolutionary sense of "primitive" seemed to be the most common use among academics of the time. All of the above uses were ensconced in the then-recently released second edition of Webster's dictionary (Porter 1913:1138):

- (1) Primitive, a.
1. Of or pertaining to the beginning or origin, or to early times; **primordial; first**
 2. Of or pertaining to a former time; old-fashioned; **characterized by simplicity**
 3. Original; primary; radical; not derived; as, **primitive verb in grammar**.
- [...]
- Syn. -- **First; original; radical; pristine; ancient; primeval; antiquated; old-fashioned.**
- Primitive, n.
- An original or primary word; a word not derived from another; -- opposed to derivative

This entry does an excellent job capturing the range of uses in practice at the time, and moreover provides clues as to the connotational meaning of the term as well. Along with the sense of ‘historical’ comes a use of the term ‘primitive’ which views indigenous peoples as being ‘ancient’ or ‘primeval’, or perhaps ‘technologically simple’. It was this sense of ‘primitive’ which Boas and others continued to utilize.

Interestingly, it is only in modern dictionaries that the term ‘primitive’ has come to be associated with being savage or uncivilized. In fact, this sense is attributed specifically to its use among anthropologists. Dictionary.com, for example, contains this sense definition:

- (2) 3. *Anthropology.* of or pertaining to a preliterate or tribal people having cultural or physical similarities with their early ancestors: no longer in technical use.
4. unaffected or little affected by civilizing influences; savage; primitive passions.

What this entry, and especially sense 3, suggests is that there has been a modern reinterpretation of early-20th Century writings on primitivism, based on the contemporary understanding of the term with its highly derogatory connotations. Thus modern readers come across phrases like ‘primitive languages’ written in the early 1900s and mentally substitute ‘savage’ or ‘uncivilized’ for ‘primitive’, whereas readers contemporary to the 1910s would substitute terms like ‘historic’, ‘original’, ‘primeval’, or perhaps ‘simple’. While today we know that some or all of these senses are misguided (e.g. modern indigenous peoples are not coequal with their ancestors, but have continued evolving culturally in response to the pressures of the time in which they live and so are as modern as any other society), they were and in some cases still are treated as objective and legitimate areas of investigation for modern research, rather than evaluative statements.

It is easy to see how this historicist tendency arose among modern readers to perceive all uses of the term ‘primitive’ as implying that the people are savage and uncivilized. The term

‘primitive’ participates in a number of oppositions to other sociocultural constructs all at once. The construct of primitivism can and is at various times opposed to complexity, modernity, civilization, and compositionality. One can see this ambiguity at work in passages like, “[This is t]he modern method of boiling, not the primitive way with stones.” (Goddard 1923:79f).

3 Challenging Primitivism

Because of the ambiguity that the system of oppositions for the notion of primitivism invites, in the mid-1900s scholars began to challenge the notion, adopting a (sometimes explicit) moralizing practice that pressured other scholars to reject the term. One much-utilized affordance that scholars have for enacting normative practices is the academic book review, so it is no surprise that it was in such reviews that the practice of criticizing uses of the term ‘primitive’ first emerged. Below is the first such case in *IJAL*.

The concluding statement of the morphological section indicates that the author's intention is to convince the reader that in Papago "**there is none of the poverty of expression that is so often popularly ascribed to the languages of the so-called primitive peoples.**" In the reviewer's opinion, a more likely result will be to leave the casual reader with the impression that Papago speech habits are so unpredictably variable that they cannot be said to be subject to "rules." (Halpern 1946:44)

This case is interesting because the author of the reviewed book takes no small pains to show that the language under study is not primitive in any sense of the term. This was another emerging practice of the time – scholars devoting space in their research specifically to showing that the language they study should not be considered ‘primitive’. The reviewer, however, chastises the author for failing to make this point in a convincing manner. In other words, the reviewer's criticism is that the author didn't dispel the notion of primitivism well enough. This is the beginning of a normative practice where linguists exercise their authority as academics to force acknowledgement of the practices in a culture of respect for indigenous peoples.

Another method of distancing oneself from the connotations of the term ‘primitive’ is the practice of preceding the word with ‘so-called’ or ‘supposed’:

Lope and his contemporaries have given us some examples of this "Indian language", purely conventionalized utterances of supposedly primitive and barbaric nature. The phonemes and their distributions are purely Spanish. No serious attempt is made at imitating Indian linguistic structure. (Wolff 1947:201)

This same author also makes a number of obvious though not explicitly stated normative statements about the inappropriateness of primitivism when applied to indigenous peoples and languages:

The attitude of the average adult is not very different. The Indian is dirty, ignorant, and incredibly primitive. Indeed, there are serious linguists, who will speak about, and look for, traces and evidence of the intrinsically primitive in the languages of the aboriginal peoples. (Wolff 1947:202)

Not all scholars moved away from the term ‘primitive’, but the moralizing discourse that arose mid-century now required acknowledgement. A new cultural practice emerged in which indigenous communities were not to be criticized, especially on grounds of primitivism, and as this practice grew, other scholars were forced to take notice of and respond to it, and failure to do so could have social consequences.

The most salient and common example of the way that this new cultural practice compelled attention was the introduction of scare quotes around the term ‘primitive’, whose first appearance in *IJAL*, by Roman Jakobson, is shown below.

In itself every grammatical pattern **as much a “civilized” as a “primitive”** one is in permanent conflict with logical reasoning, and nevertheless every language is at the same time “sufficiently pliable” to any terminological needs of culture and “to more generalized forms of thinking,” which “give a value to new, formerly unidiomatic expressions.” (Jakobson 1944:191–192)

This is the first time that the dichotomy between civilized and primitive is problematized in *IJAL*, and an early expression of the mantra that there is no such thing as a primitive language. Jakobson’s use of scare quotes, like all those who followed this practice through today, was intended to distance himself from the notion of primitivism.

These three practices – moralizing discourse, distancing oneself from primitivism through scare quotes, and devoting research time and textual space to arguing for the non-primitivism of indigenous languages – helped to constitute, and were constituted by, an emerging culture of respect for indigenous communities. In fact this culture was nothing new, arguably beginning with Boas’ work earlier in the century. It was, however, still a growing culture, and these two practices now strengthened this cultural ideology, adding to the range of practices already in common currency following Boas. At the same time, as is always the case when considering culture and cultural practices, there was a bidirectional interaction between the two. While the newer practices helped shape a culture of respect, they also arose largely because this culture of respect was already in place, leading scholars to question their own use of terminology and other practices that might be in conflict with this idea.

This discourse surrounding primitivism fixated on one issue in particular in the mid-1900s – whether indigenous languages either over-differentiated or under-differentiated semantic distinctions thought to be basic among contemporary linguists. Often languages were believed to lack abstract concepts, and this was taken to be indicative of a lack of abstract thinking on the part of its speakers. These languages were typically ascribed the label ‘primitive’, and so in this way the term took on yet another sense, i.e. an inability to think abstractly. It is from this discourse that we get the famous “words for X” debates, most especially the debate on Eskimo words for snow. In this discourse, too, the effects of the new moralizing practices are clearly visible, with some linguists even retracting their earlier position on the primitivism of languages:

When in 1903, Thalbitzer first discussed Eskimo as a linguistic type, he applied to it a conventional evolutionist term: “primitive language.” In 1936, he reviews his statement, showing that his earlier position is untenable, and admits that he employed the term carelessly. By examples from the Eskimo he demonstrates that the various meanings of “primitive” – simple, regular, uniform, childish – are not applicable. [Sebeok 1945:126]

This passage also shows a historiographic awareness of the term ‘primitive’ by explicitly associating it with earlier evolutionary anthropology of the Pre-Boasian type, and its various demeaning connotations.

The moralizing discourse regarding primitivism, particularly in relation to scholars arguing that semantic under-/over-differentiation in indigenous languages was indicative of primitivism of thought, culminated in an explicit attack on the entire notion of primitivism and the arguments underlying it in an article published in *IJAL* in 1952 titled ‘A note on primitive languages’, by Archibald Hill, which opens as follows:

Most modern linguists who have had experience of preliterate languages would reject the idea of inefficiency, formlessness, and over-particularity of primitive speech, which once seemed so well grounded in the evolutionary anthropology characteristic of the 19th century. Yet there are many who still hold such views; namely that primitive tongues have a multiplicity of forms, fail to generalize, and are almost exclusively concrete. (Hill 1952:172)

At particular issue in this paper is the claim that Cherokee has 14 different words for ‘wash’ but no general term for it, which scholars saw as stemming from a lack of capacity for abstract thought. After presenting strong and convincing evidence that Cherokee in fact only has a few words relating to ‘wash’ in a manner similar to English, Hill concludes,

It is clear that Cherokee, so far from being hopelessly over-specific, is a language like other languages, possessed of order and system, no matter if that system is different from our own.

Commented [DWH1]: This whole section needs references

[...] As to the supposed lack of generalizing power, it is ironical that the list of [words for extremities in Cherokee] generalizes in one instance more than does English. We can not content ourselves with a general term like extremity, but must specify hand or foot. I can cite still other forms which are constructed in a sufficiently generalized fashion so that Jespersen would have had to call them civilized, had he known them. (Hill 1952:176–177).

The growing culture of respect for indigenous peoples and its associated practices therefore clearly demanded acknowledgement, to the point where Thalbitzer even felt the need to take a strong position against his earlier statements, rather than simply doing nothing letting them stand. This is a trend that continues today: the need to establish a stance in relation to the notion of primitivism (usually to reject it), in acknowledgement of these moralizing practices. We will see more of this pattern in §[XX]. Nearly every use of the term ‘primitive’ in *IJAL* after Hill’s article is either limited to the domain of historical linguistics with the meaning ‘proto’, or qualified or distanced in some other way. Most significantly, the phrase ‘primitive language’ does not appear again after 1958, except in two articles that are historiographic in nature (Scancarelli 1994; Sadock 1999).

4 Repackaging Primitivism

The moralizing in relation to primitivism and the general rejection of the concept resulted in an interesting terminological problem. Because the term ‘primitive’ stood in an opposing relationship not just to notions like ‘civilized’ but also things like ‘complex’, the wholesale rejection of primitivism by linguists also had the effect of temporarily banning discussions of linguistic complexity. It is only recently that discussions of linguistic complexity have become acceptable in academic discourse, as Trudgill notes in his book *Sociolinguistic typology*:

The issue at hand for sociolinguistic typology is whether it is possible to suggest that certain linguistic features are more commonly associated with certain types of society or social structures than others. Of course, these are not new questions, as mentioned earlier; and they are also questions which linguists have, quite rightly, treated with a certain amount of suspicion in the past, because of their links with mistaken notions to do with “primitive” languages and “primitive” societies. However, after many decades of academic linguists agreeing, and asserting, that there is very definitely no such thing anywhere as a primitive language, it now seems safe to consider this issue in print without this suspicion arising. (Trudgill 2011:xvi)

Interestingly, David Gil believes that the lack of research into linguistic complexity is due to more mundane reasons:

[S]ome people seem to think that if one language were shown to be more complex than another, then it would follow that the latter language is in some sense inferior, which in turn would

entail that the speakers of that language are inferior, and from here we're only one short step to ethnic cleansing. But there were probably other, less extraneous reasons for the spread of this dogma: linguistics over the course of the last century has simply chosen to concern itself with a different range of issues, and besides, perhaps most importantly, complexity of linguistic structure is a notion that is extremely difficult to formalize in an explicit and quantitative manner.

We have seen, however, that there was in fact an explicitly normative set of practices in the mid-19th Century that had the effect of discouraging research into the linguistic correlates of primitivism and, incidentally, complexity.

Even in these recent discussions of complexity where such research is supposedly considered safe from criticism, authors still go to great pains to avoid connotations of primitivism in their work, so strong was the moralizing effect of that earlier generation of linguists. These earlier practices still demand notice lest the author be criticized for endorsing primitivism, even today. Notice for example that a discussion of primitivism was necessary to neither Trudgill nor Gil's paper. Either could have merely explained why they find linguistic complexity to be an interesting research question and continued from there. Yet both authors, and most of those writing on linguistic complexity, use a not insignificant amount of textual space to distance themselves from the notion of primitivism, and scare quotes abound. Sampson (2009) goes even further and calls the previous moralizing practices into question, calling them ideologically motivated rather than based on an objectively-based scientific rejection of primitivism or simplicity. In doing so Sampson's chapter challenges the authority that afforded earlier linguists the ability to engage in normative discourse regarding primitivism.

Despite the insistent rejection of primitivism in the modern literature on complexity, it is interesting to note that several scholars working in this area have been criticized for engaging in some of the same assumptions of cultural primitivism that Boasians and Pre-Boasians had. McWhorter's (2001) position that 'the world's simplest grammars are creole grammars', for example, has been thoroughly criticized by DeGraff (2001) for precisely this reason. One of McWhorter's central claims is that language acquire complexity over time, as the gradual accretion of irregularity and layers of change. But in cases of intense second language learning by adults that give rise to creoles, the language is reduced to only that which is 'essential to communication', and it is in virtue of this fact that creoles can be considered the world's simplest languages.

DeGraff rightly points out that this exactly mirrors the position of earlier evolutionary anthropologists who saw indigenous peoples as modern representations of their prehistoric

ancestors, stating that, for McWhorter, creoles have become a ‘contemporary *Ursprachen* [proto-language]’:

“creolistics” has kept up, and even revived, early 19th-century notions of language evolution. Indeed, creolistics is perhaps the only field where the search for a genealogical and typological class of “simplest grammars” is still at the center of contemporary research. It is thus that certain trends in creolistics are reviving Schleicher’s *Glottik* with creole languages as the new class of youngest, thus structurally simplest, linguistic species. In this modern *Glottik*, creole languages are living specimens of *Ursprachen*, i.e., contemporary proto-languages – “the world’s only instantiation of spoken language having been ‘born again’ ” in McWhorter’s (Section 2.3) evangelical phrase. (DeGraff 2001:223)

In terms of how he means to use the term, then, McWhorter is saying the same thing as many of the early anthropological linguists who used the term ‘primitive’ to mean ‘early, original, historical’. But by avoiding the term ‘primitive’, McWhorter is sidestepping the connotations that accompany the word and its other senses.

5 Conclusions

What we have seen in the discourse and practices surrounding primitivism is a change in the meaningful oppositions that constituted it over time. [Figure 1] represents these changes as a series of oppositions representing the practices of linguists in each period.

Pre-Boas	Primitive	Civilized Modern Complex Abstract / Higher-Order More Evolved
Boas	Primitive	Civilized Modern Complex (Abstract / Higher-Order)
Late 20th C	Primitive	Modern
Today	Simple	Complex Modern

At the beginning of the Boasian era, primitivism encompassed notions of simplicity, history, civilization / lack of technological sophistication, and lack of complex or higher-order thinking. After Boas’ critiques of evolutionary anthropology, primitivism was no longer seen as an apposite description of race or culture, and range of uses that the term ‘primitive’ could be put

to grew smaller. 'Primitive' no longer contrasted with 'more evolved'. And though Boas also debunked the idea that primitive peoples were incapable of abstract or higher-order thought, this remained relevant to the semantic oppositions involved, as seen in the "words for X" discussions that continued into the 1950s. Then in the 1950s, the term 'primitive' was rejected entirely, along with its various oppositions, and the idea that people could exist with a lack of abstract / higher-order thinking was criticized and abandoned. Also rejected during this period was the idea that any language could be more or less complex than any other, likely due to the conflation of linguistic simplicity and cognitive / cultural simplicity that were both seen as belonging to the concept of primitivism. In problematizing the latter, the Post-Boasian linguists also problematized the former, because at the time nobody was making the conceptual distinction. Both simply fell under the same notion, 'primitive'.

This remained the state of affairs for several decades, until McWhorter's (2001) controversial claim that creole languages are the most simple languages. What emerged from this was, on its surface, a new dichotomy between complexity and simplicity, but which upon closer examination can be shown to retain vestiges of the earlier opposition between primeval and modern, only couched in new terminology. This newer discourse, then, while meant to extract just a single opposition from the original Pre-Boasian oppositions regarding primitivism for more objective study, while abandoning those oppositions now seen to be outmoded, in fact retained some of the other oppositions as well, especially the fundamental one to evolutionary anthropology, that of primeval versus modern. It is this erroneous conception of contemporary phenomena – races, languages, cultures – as representative of some deep point in history that linguists have been attempting to escape since the time of Boas, by way of moralizing discourses that reshaped the oppositions involved, and therefore changed the ways that linguists positioned themselves in relation to primitivism. While linguists have been successful at expunging many of the assumptions of the evolutionary anthropologists, it seems there still remains work to be done to rid themselves its final vestiges.

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