

**DEFINING LINGUISTICS: E. H. STURTEVANT  
AND THE EARLY YEARS OF THE  
LINGUISTIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA**

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**Abstract:** Following the creation of the Linguistic Society of America in 1924, the classical philologist and historical linguist Edgar Howard Sturtevant played a leading role in defining American linguistics as it developed in these early years. Director of the LSA Linguistic Institutes during the summers of 1928, 1929, 1930, and 1931, Sturtevant selected Institute staff and courses. His efforts to present work on Native American languages and linguistic field methods were thwarted, but courses in phonetics and in American English lay the foundation for the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada.

**Keywords:** Sturtevant E. H., Linguistic Society of America, Linguistic Institutes, American linguistics, phonetics, American English, Native American languages, Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada

With a Call for the founding of a Linguistic Society of America (LSA) in 1924, Edgar Howard Sturtevant (1875-1952) and his colleagues on the organizing committee, Leonard Bloomfield

(1887-1949) and George Melville Bolling (1871-1963), sought to establish an institution and a journal 'devoted entirely' to the science of linguistics (*Language* 1.6[1925]). The LSA was quickly formed, attracting nearly 300 members in three months (ibid. 26-36), but defining the new linguistics took longer to accomplish. Bolling, as editor of the LSA journal *Language*, published those papers and reviews suitable for the endeavor, but it was Sturtevant who dealt most directly with the new American linguistics as he constructed the curricula of the summer Linguistic Institutes that he directed for the LSA in 1928, 1929, 1930, and 1931.

The announced goal of the Institutes was 'to encourage research and study in linguistic science' and it was expected that many of the participants would be senior scholars who would pursue their own individual research with 'access to needed books' and 'the stimulus of discussion with scholars of similar interests' (*LSA Bulletin* 3.4-5[1929]). Rather quickly, however, the central focus became the offering of courses, not only for students but also for the senior scholars, as well. What those courses were and who was appointed to teach them reveal a great deal about linguistics in the United States during the period. Sturtevant consulted on these matters with the other members of the Institute Administration Committee (Roland Grubb Kent [1887-1952] and Reinhold Saleski [1890-1971; see Falk and Joseph, 1994; Falk and Joseph, 1996]), but as Institute Director, it was he who was ultimately responsible for the curriculum, and so it is worthwhile to examine his decisions and his ideas about what linguistics was and what it should be, for these came to be incorporated into the Institutes and thereby into American linguistics (see also Falk, forthcoming).

Sturtevant's original fields of specialization were classical philology and historical linguistics (e.g. Sturtevant, 1917), but he differed from many of his more conservative colleagues in his openness to new ideas. His research on Greek and Latin pronunciation (Sturtevant, 1920) had led him to explore modern studies in phonetics, and he invited the phonetician G. Oscar Russell (1890-1962) to offer courses in 'Philological Phonetics' and 'Experimental Phonetics' at the inaugural Linguistic Institute in the summer of 1928 (*Announcement of the [1928] Linguistic Institute*). These classes provided a foundation upon which Sturtevant continued to build in later years.

Although Sturtevant himself had no direct interest in anthropological linguistics, he was eager to incorporate this perspective. In 1928 he engaged Pliny Earle Goddard (1869-1928) to teach 'Linguistic Anthropology' and 'Methods of Studying Unrecorded Languages' (ibid.), but Sturtevant's plan collapsed with Goddard's illness and death that summer. Not deterred, in December 1929 Sturtevant invited Franz Boas (1859-1942) to teach the following summer; Boas declined (Sturtevant memos to Linguistic Institute Administration Committee members, December 17 [1929] and December 22 [1929], LSA Archives ms coll # 8 series 2, American Philosophical Society Library, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; now at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, Missouri). So, in December 1930, Sturtevant wrote to Edward Sapir (1884-1939), offering him 'any course or courses you choose' for the 1931 Institute but saying bluntly that 'we ought, by all means, to include' American Indian Languages and suggesting that Sapir's presence would arouse interest in the subject (EHS to ES, December 11, 1930, LSA Archives). Under the pressure of changing academic appointments from Chicago to Yale, Sapir refused the assignment (ES to EHS, December 16,

1930, LSA Archives). If the early Institutes offered little course work on Native American languages, field methods for the study of unwritten languages, and anthropological linguistics, it was not because Sturtevant failed to seek ways of including them.

On another front, Sturtevant was more successful in the early years. He appointed Louise Pound (1872-1958), Professor of English at the University of Nebraska (see Falk, 1995), to conduct a course titled 'American English' (*Announcement of the [1928] Linguistic Institute*). This was but preface to a major focus of the Institutes that followed. Sturtevant then approached the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) for funding to conduct a *Conference on the Proposed Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada* (*LSA Bulletin* 4.9[1929]) in conjunction with the 1929 Institute. The effort was successful, the conference was held, and the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada, under the direction of Hans Kurath (1891-1992), became a major focus for American linguists during the decade of the 1930s. For 1931, Sturtevant and Kurath called upon the experience and expertise of the dialect geographers of Europe, with Sturtevant arranging funding to bring to the Institute Dr. Jakob Jud, Editor-in-Chief of the Italian Dialect Atlas, and his field-worker, Mr. Paul Scheuermeier (*LSA Bulletin* 8.4[1931]).

Over the four year period in which he directed the Institutes, Sturtevant published more than two dozen scholarly articles, almost all on Hittite, as well as the *Hittite Glossary* (Sturtevant, 1931). Why would he devote so much of his remaining energies to the promotion of areas of linguistics that might seem far removed from his research interests — to phonetics, American Indian languages, the Linguistic Atlas project? A good deal of evidence points to Sturtevant's commitment to the development of linguistics as a science. Sturtevant took a very strong position on speech as the proper subject matter of scientific linguistics, and it was important for him in the Institutes to stress those aspects of linguistic study that focused on spoken language. This is the theme that links the three areas discussed here.

With the passage of time, Sturtevant's reputation and contributions in Latin, Greek, and Hittite studies have overshadowed his important intellectual and organizational contributions to the development of American non-historical linguistics. Not all of the areas and audiences that he tried to introduce and sustain have continued to receive prominent attention from American linguists, but as we approach the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Linguistic Society of America — which will take place before this Congress meets again — it seems fitting to remember that Edgar Howard Sturtevant was a critical force in defining American linguistics in those early years.

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