

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

An Introduction

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- The session serves as a general introduction to a highly complex topic which is the interrelationship between language and culture.
- It will start addressing this issue by introducing a discipline whose main objective to study people's communicative behaviour as being **one of the systems of culture**

What is culture ?

- Culture is what basically characterizes a society as an identifiable community; it encompasses language, history, geography, religion, the political system, literature, architecture, folklore, traditions and beliefs. (Ennaji 2005 : 24).

What is culture ?

- Culture in its broadest sense is cultivated behavior; that is the totality of a person's learned, accumulated experience which is socially transmitted, or more briefly, behavior through social learning.

What is culture ?

- A culture is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along **by communication** and imitation from one generation to the next.

What is culture ?

- There is a difference between culture in the sense of **'high culture,'** i.e. the appreciation of music, literature, the arts, and so on and culture in the sense of **whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society.**

What is culture?

- This is the same sense as in Goodenough's well-known definition (1957, p. 167):
'a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.'

- That knowledge **is socially acquired**:
 - the necessary behaviors are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment.
- Culture, therefore, is the ‘know-how’ that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living.
- Only for a few does it require a knowledge of some, or much, music, literature, and the arts.

- In a nutshell, **Culture** encompasses language, history, geography, religion, the political system, literature, architecture, folklore, traditions and beliefs.
- **Language** is one of the components of culture.

- Culture is not reflected in dress patterns, dress code religious practices, philosophies about life, timing of events only
- It is also reflected in **language patterns.**
- It is, therefore, important to **study language to understand culture.**

English and Athabaskan speakers in Western Canada

- Interethnic communication difficulties occur between English speaking people of European origin and Athabaskan speakers of North American Indian origin.
- These arise in interactions between these two groups of speakers due to different speaking norms.

Historical Distribution

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Differences between the two ethnic groups

- **The whites** use language to establish social relations:
 - they speak to people in order to get to know them, and in order to find out how they stand relative to each other.
- **Athabaskan** groups, on the other hand, avoid speech if there is doubt about social relationships and about how one should behave.
 - Lengthy silences, as with the Apache and Navajo, are, therefore, readily tolerated.

- These differences in speech norms can lead to the following:
 - English speakers start the conversation, because they want to set about establishing social relations, and because Athabaskans have remained silent (on account of their lack of certainty about the nature of the situation).

- The English speakers are therefore the ones who introduce the topic of the conversation.
- When there is a pause, they become uncomfortable about the silence well before the Athabaskans do, and therefore start speaking again.

- The result is a 'conversation' where English speakers hold the floor for most of the time and control what topics are talked about.
- The Athabaskans go away from the conversation thinking that English speakers are rude, dominating, superior, garrulous, smug and self-centred.

(Trudgill 1983: 132)

- The English speakers, on the other hand, find the Athabaskans rude, superior, surly, taciturn and withdrawn.
- Differences between norms of language use between the two communities lead to misinterpretations and unfavorable stereotyping. (Ibid)

- Linguistic items are learned from other people.
- They are therefore seen as being one part of the culture as a whole.
- **Language** is, therefore, perceived as being closely associated with **other aspects of the culture** that are learned from the same people.

- If a particular person learns two different linguistic items from different groups of people, each (linguistic item) might be associated with a different set of cultural beliefs and values, it would not be surprising if each item **activates** a different set of such beliefs and values as it is used.

- **Culture** and Communication are therefore related in the sense that culture is not only learned and transmitted via communication, it is also created, shaped through it.
- Culture is also interwoven and reflected in communication.

- Having a deeper understanding of a given culture cannot be achieved without **the systematic study of the way people use language to communicate with each other.**
- There is an area of enquiry called **the ethnography of speaking** or more generally the ethnography of communication, which is concerned with the way language use in general is related to social and cultural values.

Ethnography of communication

the ethnography of speaking or more generally the **ethnography of communication**, is concerned with the way language use in general is related to social and cultural values.

According to Deborah Cameron(2001), it may be viewed as the application of ethnographic methods to the communication patterns of a group.

It is also considered to be a “**qualitative**” research method in the field of communication in the sense that it may be used to study the interactions among members of a specific culture/ speech community.

- Ethnography of Communication was originally referred to as “**Ethnography of Speaking**” in Dell Hymes’ **1962** paper.
- It was later redefined in his **1964** paper titled “**Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication**” in order to accommodate the **verbal and non-verbal characteristics of communication**.

- Most researchers working within this area tend to focus upon speaking because it is considered to be the most prominent aspect of communication.
- Ethnographers and anthropologists such as Hymes strongly believe that ways of speaking can vary substantially from one culture to another.

No gap no overlap rule

- Most middle class white Americans have a 'no gap, no overlap' rule for conversational turn-taking.
- If two or more people engaged in conversation start to talk at the same time, one will very quickly yield to the other so that the speech of two people does not overlap.
- If on the other hand there is a lull in the conversation of more than a few seconds the participants become extremely uncomfortable. Someone will start talking about something unimportant to get rid of what is considered an awkward silence.

Anthropology and linguistics

- For a long time ethnographers and linguists failed to account for an interrelationship of language and culture.
- According to Hymes, both **linguists** and **anthropologists** were missing a large and important area of human communication.

- **Anthropologists** had long conducted ethnographic studies of different aspects of cultures- usually exotic ones- such as kinship systems, or indigenous views of medicine and curing.
- They are not concerned with the way language is and how speakers go about using its structure.
- Language was treated as subsidiary ; as a way of getting at these other topics.

- Linguists, on the other hand, were paying too much attention to **language as an abstract system**.
- Linguists, in Hymes' view, were paying too much attention to language as an abstract system.
- They became interested in how to describe and explain the structures of sentences that speakers of a certain language would accept as grammatical.

- Issues relating to ‘how anybody used one of those sentences – whether to show deference, to get someone to do something, to display verbal skill, or to give someone else information – was considered simply outside the concerns of linguistic theory.’ (Fasold 1990: 39)
- ‘Linguists have abstracted from the content of speech, social scientists from its form, and both from the pattern of its use.’ (Hymes 1974: 126)

Language use in its social context

- **The ethnography of communication** would fill the gap by adding another subject (speaking or communication) to the anthropologist's list of possible topics of ethnographic description, and expand linguistics so that the study of the abstract structure of syntax, phonology, and semantics would be only one component of linguistics.
- According to Hymes, 'a more complete linguistics would be concerned with how speakers go about using these structures as well. (Fasold 1990: 40)

- Hymes, thus, called for an approach which would deal with aspects of communication which were both anthropological and linguistic.
- He launched a new discipline which he called the **ethnography of communication** that would account for the relationship between language and culture.
- His main aim is to describe and understand people's communicative behaviour in specific cultural settings by looking at 'the situations and uses, the patterns and functions, of speaking as an activity in its own right » (ibid)

- The priority which the ethnography of communication places on **modes and functions of language** is a clear point of departure from the priorities announced for linguistics by **Chomsky**:

“if we hope to understand human language and the psychological capacities on which it rests, we must first ask what it is, not how, or for what purpose it is used” (1968: 62).

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- Hymes repeatedly emphasizes that what language is cannot be separated from **how and why** it is used, and that considerations of use are often prerequisite to recognition and understanding of much of linguistic form.
- This is due to the premise or theory that the meaning of a particular expression or speech can only be understood in relation to the speech event or culture in which it is embedded.

- While recognizing the necessity to analyze the code itself and the cognitive processes of its speakers and hearers, the ethnography of communication takes language first and foremost as **a socially situated** cultural form, which is indeed constitutive of much of culture itself.
- In this field, communication is viewed as an uninterrupted flow of information and not an exchange of disconnected, separate messages.

- Communication / speech acts rather than specific languages serve as the frame of reference for analyzing the place and function of language in a particular society/culture.
- As a discipline partly based in Linguistics, the ethnography of communication approaches language differently in contrast to linguistic theories such as **structuralism or transformational grammar**.

Patterns of Communication

- It has long been recognized that much of linguistic behavior is rule-governed i.e., it follows regular patterns and constraints which can be formulated descriptively as rules.
- Hymes identifies concern for pattern as a key motivating factor in his establishment of this discipline:
“My own purpose with the ethnography of speaking was . . . to show that there was patterned regularity where it had been taken to be absent, in the activity of speaking itself”
(Hymes cited in Saville-Troike 2003).

- Sociolinguists such as Labov (1963; 1966), Trudgill (1974), and Bailey (1976) have demonstrated that what earlier linguists had considered irregularity or “free variation” in linguistic behavior can be found to show regular and predictable statistical patterns.
- Labov’s **The Social Stratification of English in New York City** was concerned with a society whose linguistic behaviour is diverse. It looked very chaotic and very hard to study that for some linguists it seemed impossible to study it systematically.

Sociolinguistics and ethnography of communication

- Both are concerned with discovering regularities in language use:
 - **Sociolinguists** typically **focus on variability in pronunciation and grammatical form.**
 - **Ethnographers** are concerned with how **communicative units** are organized and how they pattern in a much broader sense of “**ways of speaking,**” as well as with how these patterns interrelate in a systematic way with and derive meaning from other aspects of culture.

- Communication patterns occur according to particular roles and groups within a society, such as sex, age, social status, and occupation: e.g., a teacher has different ways of speaking from a lawyer, a doctor, or an insurance salesperson.
- Ways of speaking also pattern according to educational level, rural or urban residence, geographic region, and other features of social organization. (sociolinguistic variation)

Micro and macro sociolinguistics

1-Microsociolinguistics: A term sometimes used to cover the study of face-to-face interaction, discourse analysis, conversational analysis and other areas of sociolinguistics involving the study of relatively small groups of speakers.

2- Macrosociolinguistics: A term sometimes used to cover secular linguistics, the sociology of language, and other areas involving the study of relatively large groups of speakers.

- Indeed, for some, pattern is culture:

“if we conceive culture as pattern that gives meaning to social acts and entities . . . we can start to see precisely how social actors enact culture through patterned speaking and patterned action” (Du Bois cited in Saville-Troike 2003).

Ritual use of language

- **Ethnographers** are interested in the **ritual use of language** because it **encodes cultural beliefs and reflects community social organization**.
- Some common patterns are so regular, so predictable, that **a very low information load** is carried **even by a long utterance or interchange**, though the social meaning involved can be significant.

Greeting in Korean

- **Greetings** in some languages (e.g. Korean) may carry crucial information identifying speaker relationships (or attitudes toward relationships).
- **An unmarked greeting sequence** such as “Hello, how are you today? Fine, how are you?” has virtually no **referential content**.
- A lengthy greeting sequence usually carries very **low information load** when unmarked.

- **Silence** in response to another's greeting in this sequence would be **marked communicative behavior**, and would carry a very high information load for speakers of English.
- Greetings in many languages are far more elaborate than in English (e.g. Arabic, Indonesian, Igbo)
- A lengthy sequence may convey very little information as long as it is **unmarked**.
- Silence in response to another's greeting, because it is **marked** in some cultures, would carry a very high information load.
- Both can tell us a lot about the kind of relationship between people involved in the interchange.

Communicative Functions of language

At a societal level

- Language serves many functions. Language selection often relates to political goals:
 - It functions to create or reinforce boundaries in order to unify speakers as members of a single speech community. It can **act as a cement which binds people together** and helps in the reinforcement of a certain community as one social unity
 - It also functions to exclude outsiders from intragroup communication. It can constitute a boundary used to show that a group of people does not belong to a certain community.

Language as a unifying force

- The use of a given language is driven by the political urge **to unify a certain society**.
- By this the use of a given language serves some political objectives. (Standard Arabic as an example)

- Many social situations display **language which unites rather than informs**:
 - The chanting of a crowd in **a football match**, the shouting of names or slogans at public meeting.
(Crystal : The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language.
 - The crowd attending **President Reagan's** pre-election meetings in 1984 repeatedly shouted in unison 'four more years' !'

Language as an exclusionary tool

- Language can be used to exclude people.
- A case in point is the example of **Mexican settlers** who intently **excluded indigenous people** by means of language.

- The refusal of early **Spanish settlers in Mexico** to teach the Castilian language to the indigenous population was **exclusionary**.
- Language is used to mark indigenous people off as being a separate social group from the Spanish.
- Language here serves as **a means of exclusion**, a boundary separating communities as opposed to cementing social groups to make them one social block.
- **The Spanish conquest of Mexico** is generally understood to be the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire (1519–21) which was the base for later conquests of other regions.

- Members of a community may also **reinforce their boundaries by discouraging prospective second language learners**, by holding and conveying the attitude that their language is too difficult – or inappropriate – for others to use.
- Many languages are also made to serve **a social identification function** within a society by providing linguistic indicators which may be used **to reinforce social stratification**, or to maintain differential power relationships between groups.

- The functions which language differences in a society are assigned may also include the maintenance and manipulation of individual social relationships and networks, and various means of effecting social control.
- **Divergence**, which is the opposite of **speech accommodation or convergence**, can serve this function.
- Divergence takes place when people wish to emphasize their personal, social, religious, or other identity.
- There may be quite elementary reasons for divergence, such as the dislike of the listener's appearance or behavior.

- Linguistic features are often employed by people, consciously or unconsciously, to identify themselves and others, and thus serve to mark and maintain various social categories and divisions.
- The potential use of language to create and maintain power is part of a central topic among ethnographers of communication and other sociolinguists concerned with language-related inequities

At the level of individuals

- The functions of communication are directly related **to the participants' purposes and needs** (Hymes 1961; 1972c cited in Saville-Troike 2003). These include such categories of functions as:
 - **Expressive** (conveying feelings or emotions)
 - **directive** (requesting or demanding),
 - **referential** (true or false propositional content, communicating ideas)
 - **poetic** (aesthetic)
 - **phatic** (empathy and solidarity)
 - **metalinguistic** (reference to language itself)

- **Phatic communication** is **verbal** or **non-verbal communication** that has a **social function**, such as to start a conversation, greet someone, or say goodbye, rather than an **informative function**.

Example:

Waving hello is non-verbal phatic communication and **saying 'How's it going?'** is verbal.

- Learners sometimes find it difficult to recognise phatic communication.
- For example, a **learner** may interpret the American English phatic structure 'What's up?' as a question that needs an answer.

- The list is similar to **Searle's (1977a)** classes of **illocutionary acts (representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, declarations)**, but there are differences in perspective and scope which separate the fields of ethnography of communication and speech act theory.

- **Representatives** : Acts in which words state what the speaker believes to be the case, such as describing, 'claiming', 'hypothesising', 'insisting'.
- **Directives** : Acts in which words are aimed at making the hearer do something, such as 'commanding', 'requesting', 'inviting'
- 'Good Lord, deliver us'

- **Commissives** : Acts in which the words commit the speaker to future action, such as ‘promising’, ‘offering’, ‘threatening’, ‘refusing’
- **Expressives** : Acts in which the words state what the speaker feels, such as ‘apologising’, ‘praising’, ‘congratulating’, ‘deploring’
- **Declarations** : Words and expressions that change the world by their very utterance, such as ‘I bet’, ‘I declare’, ‘I resign’
‘I baptise this boy John Smith.’

Ethnography of communication and speech act theory

- Speech act theory's primary focus is **on form**, with the speech act almost always **coterminous with sentences** in analysis.
- For **ethnographers**, the **functional perspective has priority in description**, and while function may coincide with a single grammatical sentence, it often does not, or a single sentence may serve several functions simultaneously.

- while speech act theorists generally exclude the metaphorical and phatic uses of language from basic consideration, these constitute a major focus for ethnographic description.
- Phatic communication conveys a message, but has **no referential meaning**. The meaning is in the act of communication itself. Much of ritual interaction is included in this category, and not accounting for such functions of communication is ignoring much of language as it is actually used.

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