

Ethnography of communication

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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.

References

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- Saville-Troike, Muriel. 2003. The Ethnography of Communication : An Introduction. Blackwell Publishing