

## ***Course 1: Introduction to Ethnography of Communication***

Ethnography is a field of study which is concerned primarily with the description and analysis of culture, and linguistics is a field concerned, among other things, with the description and analysis of language codes. In spite of long-standing awareness of the interrelationship of language and culture, the descriptive and analytic products of ethnographers and linguists traditionally failed to deal with this interrelationship. Even anthropological linguists and linguistic anthropologists until the 1960s typically gave little attention to the fact that the uses of language and speech in different societies have patterns of their own which are worthy of ethnographic description, comparable to – and intersecting with – patterns in social organization and other cultural domains. The realization of this omission led Dell Hymes to call for an approach which would deal with aspects of communication which were escaping both anthropology and linguistics.

With the publication of his essay “The ethnography of speaking” in 1962, Hymes launched a new synthesizing discipline which focuses on the patterning of communicative behavior as it constitutes one of the systems of culture, as it functions within the holistic context of culture, and as it relates to patterns in other component systems. The *ethnography of communication*, as the field has come to be known since the publication of a volume of the *American Anthropologist* with this title (Gumperz and Hymes 1964), has in its development drawn heavily upon (and mutually influenced) sociological concern with interactional analysis and role identity, the study of performance by anthropologically oriented folklorists, and the work of natural-language philosophers. In combining these various threads of interest and theoretical orientation, the ethnography of communication has become an emergent discipline, addressing a largely new order of information in the structuring of communicative behavior and its role in the conduct of social life.

As with any science, the ethnography of communication has two foci: particularistic and generalizing. On the one hand, it is directed at the description and understanding of communicative behavior in specific cultural

settings, but it is also directed toward the formulation of concepts and theories upon which to build a global metatheory of human communication. Its basic approach does not involve a list of facts to be learned so much as questions to be asked, and means for finding out answers. In order to attain the goal of understanding both the particular and the general, a broad range of data from a large variety of communities is needed.

A major early contribution to the field included an outline of information to be collected in doing ethnographies of communication, by Dell Hymes, Joel Sherzer, Regna Darnell, and others (1967), and this served as a guide for the scope and organization of the first edition of this book in 1982. Other major contributors to the development of the field have included John Gumperz, Dan Slobin, Richard Bauman, Susan Philips, Susan Ervin-Tripp, Shirley Brice Heath, and Ben Blount. Hymes's influence has been so pervasive that it is impossible to specifically credit each of the concepts and visions for which he was initially responsible, and which inform this book and the work of others in various ways.

## **Scope and Focus**

The subject matter of the ethnography of communication is best illustrated by one of its most general questions: what does a speaker need to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community, and how does he or she learn to do so? Such knowledge, together with whatever skills are needed to make use of it, is *communicative competence*. The requisite knowledge includes not only rules for communication (both linguistic and sociolinguistic) and shared rules for interaction, but also the cultural rules and knowledge that are the basis for the context and content of communicative events and interaction processes. Each of these components will be further delineated in the chapters which follow.

The focus of the ethnography of communication is the *speech community*, the way communication within it is patterned and organized as systems of communicative events, and the ways in which these interact with all other systems of culture. A primary aim of this approach is to guide the collection and analysis of descriptive data about the ways in which social meaning is conveyed: "If we ask of any form of communication the simple question what is being communicated? the answer is: information from the social system" (Douglas 1971: 389). This makes the ethnography of communication a mode of inquiry which carries with it substantial content.

Among the basic products of this approach are ethnographic descriptions of ways in which speech and other channels of communication are used in diverse communities, ranging from tribal groups in Africa and the Amazon

regions, to nomadic herdsmen, to highly industrialized peoples in Europe, Asia, and North America. 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).

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. 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. To accept a lesser scope for linguistic description is to risk reducing it to triviality, and to deny any possibility of understanding how language lives in the minds and on the tongues of its users.

## **Method**

"Doing ethnography" in another culture involves first and foremost field work, including observing, asking questions, participating in group activities, and testing the validity of one's perceptions against the intuitions of natives. Research design must allow an openness to categories and modes of thought and behavior which may not have been anticipated by the investigator. The ethnographer of communication cannot even presuppose what a speech community other than his own may consider to be "language," or who or what may "speak" it: "language" for the Ojibwa includes thunder; dogs among the Navajo are said to understand Navajo; the Maori regard musical instruments as able to speak; and drums and shells are channels through which supernatural forces are believed to speak to members of the Afro-Cuban Lucumí religious cult.

Ethnography by no means requires investigating only "others": one's own speech community may be profitably studied as well. Here, however, discovering patterned behavior which operates largely unconsciously for the native investigator presents quite different problems for "objectivity." One of the best means by which to gain understanding of one's own "ways of speaking" is to compare and contrast these ways with others, a process that can reveal that many of the communicative practices assumed to be "natural" or "logical" are in fact as culturally unique and conventional as the language code itself. A valuable by-product which emerges from this process is an

essential feature of all ethnography: a deeper understanding of cultural relativism.

Complete escape from subjectivity is never possible because of our very nature as cultural animals; however, the constraints and guidelines of the methodology are intended to minimize our perceptual and analytical biases. The tradition of participant-observation is still basic for all ethnography, but it may be augmented by a variety of other data collection and validation procedures depending on the focus of investigation and the relation of the investigator to the speech community being studied.

## **Historical Background**

Ethnographic study has been at the core of anthropology virtually since its inception, both in Britain and America. The American tradition, begun by Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber, tended toward a somewhat static presentation of cultural patterns and artifacts which was sometimes criticized as the “trait list approach.” The British tradition, which came to be called “functionalist,” was developed along two rather different orientations by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski, both of which strongly influenced American anthropology. The British tradition, especially following Malinowski, was much concerned with the social and cultural “meaning” of actions, events, objects, and laws as they functioned within the immediate or larger cultural context.

North American anthropologists, beginning with Boas, were primarily concerned with preparing ethnographic descriptions of Native American cultures before they were destroyed or assimilated by European settlers. Even before Boas, however, the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) under John Wesley Powell had placed a priority on describing Native American languages and collecting texts, which still serve as a major source of data for comparative studies of languages on the North American continent. Few of the linguistic descriptions from this period go beyond a sketch of the phonological system and grammatical structures (as outlined in Powell 1877; 1880; Boas 1911) and a list of vocabulary items collected according to a schedule distributed by the BAE (e.g., see Powell 1880), but accompanying reports often include observations which are relevant to understanding patterns of communication. In his *Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages*, Powell clearly states his intent to relate the description of language to other aspects of culture:

It has been the effort of the author to connect the study of language with the other branches of anthropology, for a language is best understood when

the habits, customs, institutions, philosophy – the subject-matter of thought embodied in the language – are best known. The student of language should be a student of the people who speak the language; and to this end the book has been prepared, with many hints and suggestions relating to other branches of anthropology. (1880: vi)

One of the earliest sociolinguistic descriptions I can find within this tradition was prepared by a physician, J. B. White, who described Apache greeting behavior in an unpublished manuscript from the 1870s:

Kissing which seems to us natural [as] an expression of affection is never practised by the Apaches – and they seem to have no form of salute or of greeting – when meeting or of taking leave of each other. On one occasion the writer of this – being curious to know what kind of reception an Indian would give his wife and family after an absence from them of several months – placed himself in a position, where he could overlook (without himself being noticed) an Apache's entrance into his dwelling after a long absence. In this instance the Indian simply rode up to his little brush dwelling and dismounted. One of his wives took charge of the horse. [He] approached a fire along side of his hut where his family were collected without exchanging a word to any of them – not even to the wife who had taken the horse. There he stood motionless and speechless for some ten to fifteen minutes when at last he took a seat on the ground and engaged in ordinary conversation without having observed any form of greeting. (Cf. the more recent description of Apache greetings in Basso 1970.)

Occasionally, descriptions of traditional educational practices contained references to training in “speaking well,” as in this brief mention of sociolinguistic constraints imposed on girls of the Carrier Indian tribe of Canada: “The stone labret worn by the noble maiden was a perpetual reminder to her that she should speak slowly and with deliberation” (Jenness 1929: 26). Most information on communication beyond the vocabulary lists and structural sketches of the language codes was limited to listings of kinship terms, reflecting social organization and role-relationships within the groups; ethnological dictionaries, indicating plants and animals in the environment and of importance to the culture; and accounts of language origins and attitudes toward language reflected in creation myths and other folkloristic texts.

The American tradition of descriptive linguistics in conjunction with anthropological fieldwork continued with such notable figures as Edward Sapir, and (in spite of the divergence of an “autonomous linguistics”) more recently in the work of such Amerindian language scholars as Floyd Lounsbury, Mary Haas, Carl Voegelin, Paul Friedrich, and Dell Hymes.

Ethnography underwent a period of decline within anthropology during the middle years of the last century as values began to favor more “scientific”

studies of social structure and issue-oriented research. There was a resurgence of interest, however, deriving from Goodenough's cognitive reformation of the concept of culture, and in the wave of growing disenchantment with behaviorism. Observed behavior was recognized as a manifestation of a deeper set of codes and rules, and the task of ethnography was seen as the discovery and explication of the rules for contextually appropriate behavior in a community or group; in other words, culture was conceived to be what the individual needs to know to be a functional member of the community.

Concurrent with this latter development in anthropology was the introduction of interactionist and cognitive orientations in sociology by Goffman and Cicourel, which focused attention on the processes by which members of a community negotiate relations, outcomes, and meanings, and construct new realities and meanings as they do so. Hymes reports that he and others who were advancing "a social approach to language" during this period were influenced by developments in European linguistics:

Some of us with interest in the Prague School saw its attention to a range of functions and factors (e.g. Jakobson 1960) as healthy and desirable. That was a stimulus to me, in any case, seeming to provide a basis in linguistics itself for the study of language as organized as a part of social life. (2000: 313)

The convergent interest in sociology and linguistics, and the description of language use in a social context, raised serious questions about the autonomy of linguistics and the "ideal speaker-hearer" in the "completely homogeneous speech-community" (Chomsky 1965: 3), central concepts in the dominant theoretical model of American linguistics during the 1960s. By the end of that decade, merely accounting for *what* can (and cannot) be said in a language, but not *when, where, by whom, to whom, in what manner, and under what particular social circumstances* it can (or cannot) be said, came to be considered inadequate as a goal for linguistics by many linguists, and by all identifying themselves as "sociolinguists."

## Significance

While the goals of ethnography are at least in the first instance descriptive, and information about diverse "ways of speaking" is a legitimate contribution to knowledge in its own right, the potential significance of the ethnography of communication goes far beyond a mere cataloging of facts about communicative behavior.

For anthropology, the ethnography of communication extends understandings of cultural systems to language, at the same time relating language

to social organization, role-relationships, values and beliefs, and other shared patterns of knowledge and behavior which are transmitted from generation to generation in the process of socialization/enculturation. Further, it contributes to the study of cultural maintenance and change, including acculturation phenomena in contact situations, and may provide important clues to culture history.

For psycholinguistics, the ethnography of communication means that studies of language acquisition must now not only recognize the innate capacity of children to learn to speak, but must account for how particular ways of speaking are developed in particular societies in the process of social interaction. Experimental design can no longer presume that mothers are primary caregivers in all societies, for example, nor can a researcher assume that the presence of an observer (and a tape recorder) will distort data comparably in all settings among all groups. Any study of language pathologies outside of one's own speech community must include culture-specific information on what is considered "normal" and "aberrant" performance within the other group. Claims about universal strategies and processes need to be tested against descriptive data from other cultures, and such cross-cultural research requires the openness and relativism of ethnographic methods.

For sociolinguistic research, which generally involves recording naturalistic speech in various contexts, the potential contribution of this perspective was noted by Gumperz:

Even after the material has been recorded, it is sometimes impossible to evaluate its social significance in the absence of ethnographic knowledge about social norms governing linguistic choice in the situation recorded. (1970: 9)

Again, the qualitative information which forms an essential part of ethnographies of communication should become an important prerequisite for sampling, data collection, and interpretation in quantitative studies. Experimental design which is based only on the researcher's own cultural presuppositions has no necessary validity in a different speech community.

For the field of applied linguistics, one of the most significant contributions made by the ethnography of communication is the identification of what a second language learner must know in order to communicate appropriately in various contexts in that language, and what the sanctions may be for any violations or omissions. There are also important applications for contrasting whole communicative systems in cross-cultural interaction and translation, and for recognizing and analyzing communicative misunderstandings.

For theoretical linguistics, the ethnography of communication can make a significant contribution to the study of universals in language form and use, as well as to language-specific and comparative fields of description and

analysis. Its approach and findings are essential for the formulation of a truly adequate theory of language and linguistic competence.

Throughout this book, an attempt has been made to relate the methods and products of the ethnography of communication to the other disciplines which are concerned with the description, explanation, and application of various aspects of communication. Because the book is included in a series on sociolinguistics, particular emphasis is placed on the relationship of the ethnography of communication to other developments in this field. In particular, the position is taken here that qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of culturally situated communication are not mutually exclusive, and that each can and should inform the other. While ethnography has tended to be identified exclusively with qualitative approaches, many practitioners today are recognizing the need to extend the boundary to include quantitative data in ethnographic descriptions. Gumperz and others have also stressed the need to look at the larger sociopolitical contexts within which culturally situated communication takes place, as these contexts may determine features of communication in ways that are not evident from a narrow focus on communicative patterns alone. An important development in ethnography and related fields has been emphasis on how sociopolitical contexts may be determined and reinforced by features of communication, as well as determinative of them.

Thus while the ethnography of communication has a unique contribution to make in terms of the questions it asks and its relativistic perspective, its contribution to the description and understanding of culturally constituted patterns of communication will be limited if its methods and findings are not integrated with other descriptive and analytical approaches. It is the nature of ethnography to be holistic in nature, and this should also characterize the disciplinary orientation of its practitioners.

A well-known fable tells of three blind men describing an elephant: to one (feeling the tail) it is like a rope; to one (feeling the side) it is flat and leathery; and to one (feeling the trunk) it is like a long rubber hose. While each perception is accurate so far as it goes individually, they fail to provide an accurate picture of the total animal because there is no holistic perspective. Such an integrative approach seems essential if we are to fulfill Hymes's call to develop an ethnographic model for the study of communication which will help us more fully to understand its role in human affairs.