

The ethnography of speaking

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The **ethnography of speaking**- or, more generally, the **ethnography of communication** - is the study of the organization of speaking as an activity in human society /Ralf Fasold/

The study of the ethnography of communication was initiated by **Dell Hymes** in the early 1960s.

What the ethnography of communication is all about

- Hymes emphasizes that ways of speaking can vary substantially from one culture to another, even in the most fundamental ways.
- ‘no gap, no overlap’ rule for conversational turn-taking
- Antiguans: more than one speaker speaking simultaneously
- Lapp community in northern Sweden: conversational gaps are part of the ordinary way people talk

Lapp Community example

“We spent some days in a borrowed sod house in the village of Rensjoen... Our neighbors would drop in on us every morning just to check that things were all right. We would offer coffee. After several minutes of silence the offer would be accepted. We would tentatively ask a question. More silence, than a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. Then a long wait. After five or ten minutes we would ask another. Same pause, same ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Each visit lasted approximately ...Then our guest would leave to repeat the performance the next day.

How do we decide what a social group is for purposes of ethnographic description?

- it cannot be all citizens of the same country
- It cannot be decided on the basis of speaking the same language, either

speech community

- A central concept is the **speech community**.

It refers to a group of people who share the same rules and patterns for

what to say, and when and how to say it.

The focus of attention shifts from the sentence to the act of communication, the **speech event**.

Saville-Troike (1982)

A valuable addition to understanding speech community: speech communities should be understood as overlapping.

That is, each individual speaker can, and probably does, belong simultaneously to several speech communities; some of the smaller ones included in larger ones, and some separate from the others.

Situation, event and act

Hymes suggested that a nested hierarchy of units called the **speech situation**, **speech event**, and **speech act** would be useful, and his suggestion has been widely accepted.

The three units are a nested hierarchy in the sense that *speech acts* are *part of speech events* which are, in turn, *part of speech situation*.

speech situation

‘situations associated with (or marked by the absence of) speech’ like ceremonies, fights, hunts.

As Hymes sees it, speech situations are not purely communicative; they may be composed of both communicative and other kinds of events. Speech situations are not themselves subject to rules of speaking, but can be referred to by rules of speaking as contexts.

Speech events

They are both communicative and governed by rules for the use of speech.

A speech event takes place within a speech situation and is composed of one or more speech acts. For example, a joke might be a *speech act* that is part of a conversation (a *speech event*) which takes place at a party (a *speech situation*).

speech act

‘Speech act’ is the simplest and the most troublesome level at the same time.

It is troublesome because it has a slightly different meaning in the study of the ethnography of communication from the meaning given to the term in linguistic pragmatics and in philosophy, and because it seems it is not quite “minimal’ after all.

According to Hymes,

a speech act is to be distinguished from the sentence and is not to be identified with any unit at any level of grammar.

A speech act could have forms ranging from,

“By the authority vested in me by the laws of this state, I hereby command you to leave this building immediately”,

to, “Would you mind leaving now?”,

to, ‘I sure would like some peace and quiet’,

to ‘Out!’

speech act status

For Hymes, a speech act gets its status from the **social context** as well as **grammatical form** and **intonation**.

Minimal component of speech events?

Although speech acts were proposed as the minimal component of speech events, it has become clear that they are not actually quite 'minimal' (Coulthard 1977:44). Hymes mention jokes as an example of a speech act, but some jokes, like knock-knock jokes or riddles, require speech moves by more than one speaker. For example:

- What do you get when you cross a watermelon with persimmon?
- I don't know, what?
- A fruit that's impossible to spit the seeds out.

model of communication

(first proposed by Roman Jakobson)

- Dell Hymes suggested that any communicative use of language or **speech event** is constituted by **eight distinct factors**, whose first letters spell out the word SPEAKING, each associated with a different **function**:
 1. **situation** (Setting and scene: speech event)
 2. **participants** (speaker – listener)
 3. **ends** (outcomes and goals)
 4. **act sequence** (Message form)
 5. **key** (the manner or spirit in which a speech act is carried out)
 6. **instrumentalities** (channels and forms of speech)
 7. **norms** (both of interaction and interpretation)
 8. **genres** (poems, myths, proverbs, lectures, and commercial messages)

The structure of conversations

Who	Utterance	Comment
Caller	(dials; phone rings)	This is the summons
Other	Hello?	Answer
Caller	Hello, this is Joe. Is that Bill?	Identification
Other	Yes	Identity stage
Caller	The meeting is still on?	Message
Other Yes.	I'll see you there.	Acknowledgment
Caller	OK. Bye.	Close
Caller		Hangs up

formal structure of conversations

The important notion from our point of view is that there is a **formal structure of conversations**, in part *determined* **by the nature of the event** (until the answerer says something, the caller has no one to talk to), and in part determined **by social rules** (what it is appropriate to say to specific people in defined circumstances).

METHODOLOGY

The most important methods of data collecting are

'Participant-observation'

'Introspection'

'Participant-observation'

The investigator moves into a community (typically a little-studied group in a remote part of the world), attempt to find some role to play as at least a marginal member of the community, and try to gain an intimate feel for group values and communicative patterns. The researcher is normally a participant-observer for a period of months or years.

'Introspection'

Introspection is used in the study of the investigator's own culture. Using introspection, the researcher tries to make explicit the rules and values unconsciously absorbed while growing up in a particular community.

The goal of work in the ethnography of speaking

is to gain a **global understanding of the viewpoints and values of a community** as a way of explaining **the attitudes and behavior of its members**

Criticism

Research in the ethnography of speaking is sometimes criticized for the repetitive collection of data from numerous societies at the expense of an attempt to build a general theory of human communication that would have some generality over all societies.