HANDBOOK OF COMPARATIVE COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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Comparing Language and Social Interaction

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Put broadly, the central concern of language and social interaction scholars is how interlocutors make sense to one another by means of particular acts of communication in the context of observable, situated interaction. In his discussion of language and social interaction as subject matter Sanders (2005) writes: "That people succeed far more often than not in saying things that are coherent entails that they make them coherent by speaking in such a way, at such junctures, to and among such people, as to make their meaning recoverable" (p. 3). Interlocutors' apparent success at communicating implies, language and social interaction scholars agree, that (1) they have a set of interactional resources (morphemes, syntactic structures, adjacency pairs, discursive forms, etc.) at their disposal that they can use to engage in observable interaction in meaningful ways; that (2) the meaning of a given interactional resource is constituted by its functionality in the specific moment of its use; that (3) the meaningful use of interactional resources has a systematic basis; and that (4) meaningful interaction requires the cooperation or joint action of all interlocutors involved in any interactional moment. It should be noted that language and social interaction scholars are equally interested in interlocutors' successes and failures at achieving meaningful interaction.

FOUNDATIONS

Communication scholars who identify with the language and social interaction research program align themselves with a variety of research traditions. As a result, in their analysis of social interaction they tend to focus on different functions of interactional resources-in-use and identify different systematic bases of meaningfulness. According to Sanders and Fitch (2005), language and social interaction is best seen as a multidisciplinary confederation of five subfields: language pragmatics, conversation analysis, languages and social psychology, discourse analysis, and ethnography of communication. Language pragmatics is primarily concerned with the linguistic and cognitive conditions under which utterances acquire functionality in particular interactional situations. Conversation analysis is interested in how speakers produce task-oriented, purposive, ordinary conversation by constructing turns at talk that respond to previous turns and anticipate subsequent ones, and how and to what extent certain institutions place constraints on such

ordinary conversation. The formation of attitudes toward interlocutors in the process of social interaction and the consequences of those attitudes for social interaction is the main concern of language and social psychology. The ethnography of communication looks at the ways in which particular speech communities make use of shared cultural resources and how those resources constitute locally meaningful expressive systems. Finally, discourse analysis comprises language and social interaction work that does not fit neatly into the other four subfields. Simply put, discourse analysis "includes any strand of research not named above that records and transcribes segments of interaction and then interprets and analyzes excerpts of talk and text as the central means to build its arguments" (Tracy & Haspel, 2004, p. 795).

Our aim in this chapter is to discuss the significant role comparative research can play in the language and social interaction research program. We start by arguing that the function language and social interaction subfields assign to comparative research can be located between two ends of a spectrum. At one end, language and social interaction scholars use comparative analysis to sustain or challenge universal claims about the functions of particular interactional resources. In this kind of work, comparative research plays a *corrective* role in that its primary function is to calibrate the scope of claims made about resources, their use and the systematic basis of that use in social interaction. At the other end we locate research that explicitly identifies comparative work as the very articulation of its intellectual commitments, and is designed to invite further comparative reflection. Here, comparative research plays a *constitutive* role in that comparative analysis is at once the chief means and end of the research agenda.

In a corrective capacity, comparative language and social interaction research tests the scope of universal claims about social interaction in particular institutional or cultural contexts. A classic example of such work is Godard's (1977) study of the difference between U.S. American and French phone call openings. Godard argues that conversation analysts fail to capture the full meaning of a simple "Hello?" or "Allo?" at the beginning of a phone conversation if they do not take into account the culturally specific interpretive frames speakers use to make sense of these conversations. Whereas for an American caller "Hello?" signals availability for conversation, Godard argues that the French "Allo?" indicates the answerer's willingness to be interrupted in the middle of their ongoing task by the caller. Zimmerman (1999) provides a useful discussion of the analytic potential of this type of comparative research in language and social interaction scholarship. In its constitutive capacity comparative research begins with the acknowledgment of the diversity of interactional functions and contexts, and then seeks to explain how the use of particular interactional resources and the particular contexts of their use render one another meaningful. Frake's (1980) ethnographic study of "asking for a drink" among the Subanun of Mindanao within the framework of social events featuring drinking performs this kind of comparative analysis. To summarize: whereas comparative language and social interaction research in a corrective mode asks, "Do our claims about this interactional phenomenon hold up in a variety of socio-cultural contexts?" constitutive comparative research asks, "What does the accomplishment of an interactional phenomenon teach us about the socio-cultural context in which it is accomplished, and how does the context serve as the basis of that accomplishment?"

As members of a theoretically and methodologically diverse confederation of subdisciplines, language and social interaction scholars often find themselves disagreeing about how social interaction should be studied. In order to capture the comparative potential of language and social interaction we decided to focus on the ethnography of communication, a subfield that demonstrates the full spectrum of comparative approaches, instead of representing the full range of often conflicting approaches to comparative scholarship in language and social interaction. In the following section we use comparative research in the ethnography of communication

tradition to demonstrate language and social interaction's comparative potential in greater detail. We conclude this section with a brief sketch of comparative studies in the other four subfields of language and social interaction.

In conversation analysis, explicitly comparative research is a relatively new development. The first volume of conversation analytic scholarship dedicated fully to comparative study was published only recently (Sidnell, 2009a; see Enfield & Stivers, 2007; Luke & Pavlidou, 2002, as edited volumes containing comparative conversation analytic studies). Conversation analysts demonstrate how speakers of particular languages rely on locally available linguistic resources to deal with universally relevant, generic types of conversational trouble (Sidnell, 2009b). In an exceptionally ambitious project, Fox et al. (2009) compare how same-turn self-repairs are accomplished in seven languages (Bikol, Sochiapam Chinantec, English, Finnish, Indonesian, Japanese, and Mandarin). Schegloff (2009) calls attention to conversation analysis's potential for comparison across various turn-taking systems within the same linguistic community (ordinary conversation vs. conversation in organizational settings), across various data types (audio vs. video), across age groups and among groups featuring particular numbers of participants. Currently in language pragmatics, most pragmaticians tend to pursue studies in the traditions of speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1979; Vanderveken, 1990/1991), relevance theory (Grice, 1989; Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Wilson & Sperber, 2004), a theory interested in the socio-psychological dynamics of relevance, or the theory of presuppositions, which interrogates the relationship between grammatical structure and intended meaning (Atlas, 2004; Levinson, 1983). From among these three traditions, scholarship on speech acts has generated a vast amount of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparative studies (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Cohen, 2005; Crawshaw, Culpeper, & Harison, 2010; Egner, 2006; Eslami, 2005; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Ogiermann, 2008; Olshtain & Cohen, 1989; Wierzbicka, 1985, 1991). An intellectual cousin of speech act theory called politeness theory often attracts scholarly criticism based on the comparative analysis of politeness practices (see Tracy, 2008). The bulk of comparative studies within language and social psychology stems from Giles's influential communication accommodation theory (CAT) (Giles & Wiemann, 1987). This type of research takes identity—mainly in terms of ethnic, national, or gender affiliation—as its unit of comparison in order to explore the effects that intergroup interactional contact has on communication and the ways in which perceived differences and similarities relate to attitude formation towards the "other." The studies usually concentrate on how divisive boundaries are maintained through language, and they either provide evidence for CAT's initial hypotheses (e.g., Jones, Gallois, Barker, & Callan, 1994; Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Barker, 1999; Hung Ng & He, 2004) or develop what they perceive as weaker areas in the theory (Fowler & Soliz, 2010; Llamas, Watt, & Johnson, 2009; Namy, Nygaard, & Sauerteig, 2002; Purnell, 2009). Comparative research in discourse analysis has been mainly concerned with the ways in which specific ideologies relate to discursive practices across national contexts. Whereas some of these studies are meant to highlight the transnational character of systems of beliefs, others emphasize the necessity to look at the specific shapes that a particular discourse takes in a given cultural environment. An especially important area of inquiry within the search for commonalities across countries has been the critical study of racism and the different discursive practices through which it is communicated (e.g., Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 1993, 2005; Wodak & Reisigl, 2001; Wodak & van Dijk, 2000). Some representative examples of the emphasis on discursive differences across national contexts include Heinz, Cheng, and Inizuka (2007), Menard-Warwick (2009), Fetscher (2009), Pounds (2010), Murata (2007), and Torck (2001).

COMPARATIVE LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION RESEARCH IN THE CONSTITUTIVE AND CORRECTIVE MODE: THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION

Comparative work done in the five language and social interaction subfields can be located at various points between the two ends of the corrective-constitutive spectrum. In order to illustrate the full potential of comparative research within language and social interaction we focus on the subfield that does not only declare comparative research as a central tenet of its research agenda but also assigns the widest spectrum of functions to comparative research: the ethnography of communication. As we demonstrate below in our discussion of the ethnography of communication's historical roots, although ethnographers of communication lean strongly toward the constitutive end, they also find value in, and practice, comparative research in the corrective mode.

Dell Hymes is generally credited with laying the intellectual foundations of the ethnography of communication. Hymes (1972) introduces the idea of speech community as the basic unit of analysis for the ethnographer with an interest in social interaction. He defines a speech community as "a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety" (p. 54). Hymes's focus on speech communities follows, in a large part, from his critique of Sapir and Whorf's linguistic relativity theory which suggests that cultural variation in grammatical structure brings about variation in ontological and epistemological assumptions among social groups. Hymes (1973) suggests that there is a more fundamental type of linguistic relativity underlying the relativity of linguistic structure: the *relativity of functions* that linguistic resources acquire in the day-to-day life of a given social group. Hymes argues that Sapir and Whorf fail to take into account that the grammatical structure of a language is firmly anchored in, and is the product of, the patterned ways communal members use language to take care of the business of everyday life. The description and analysis of these patterned ways of speaking allow the ethnographic researcher to formulate local *ways of speaking* (Hymes, 1974). "Ways of speaking" is an analytic construct designed to capture not only locally available linguistic resources and the styles of their use but also the cultural basis of that use, the community's "orientations towards persons, roles, statuses, rights and duties, deference and demeanor" (Hymes, 1973, p. 75).

For Hymes, the notions of the functional relativity of linguistic resources and the interaction between language and social life suggest the necessity of the comparative study of language use across speech communities. In his 1972 essay Hymes argues that the ethnography of communication's task is to classify and compare the social functions of interactional resources, within and across speech communities, in order to gain an increasingly nuanced understanding of how and to what extent language use can serve the purpose of participation in social life. The ethnography of communication's vision of comparative research, thus, has one eye on the particular (the functionality of a given interactional resource or resources in a given speech community) and one on the universal (gradually accumulating knowledge about the life of language in society). But Hymes and subsequent developers of the ethnography of communication's research program leave little doubt that, at least at the present historical juncture, their research emphasis falls on understanding the particular instead of universal claims. As Carbaugh (1991) explains, the ethnography of communication's primary interest lies in "understanding communication practices *sui generis*, on their own terms, and as they are variously lived in various places" (p. 341). Stewart and Philipsen (1984) instruct that the ethnography of communication is committed primarily to the description of situated interaction and only secondarily to theorizing universals. Hymes

encourages his readers to ask the following question in response to charges that ethnography does not yield "generalizable" results: "Whose power is hurt if the pretense of theoretically generalizable results is stripped away?" (1980, p. xii).

To avoid the misunderstanding of the ethnography of communication's stance toward universal claims, we reiterate: The ethnography of communication has a clearly stated interest in theorizing the functionality of linguistic resources beyond particular contexts. Comparative work in the corrective mode is not foreign to the ethnography of communication's commitments. Hymes (1980) writes that the ethnographic study of a linguistic resource necessitates familiarity with "accumulated comparative knowledge" (p. 96) about that resource. Carbaugh and Hastings (1992) maintain that ethnography of communication research routinely engages existing communication activity theories in order to make sense of local cultural practices and uses findings to affirm, criticize, or expand those theories. For example, Chen (1990/1991) and Katriel (2004) successfully challenge some of Brown and Levinson's (1987) claims about the universal properties of politeness practices in the light of ethnographies conducted, respectively, in Chinese and Israeli contexts.

THE CULTURAL VIEW OF SILENCE IN INTERACTION

In what follows we illustrate the state of the art in comparative studies within language and social interaction by concentrating on a specific area of research: studies of silence in the ethnography of communication tradition. As our review will show, the comparative impulse within this approach has led to remarkable insights on the meanings, functions, and effects of silence as a communicative practice. Ethnographic research on the functions and meanings of silence constitutes one of the most significant contributions of the ethnography of communication to the growing body of language and social interaction research. The ethnography of communication successfully challenges the dominant reductionist Western view of silence as the suspension of speech by demonstrating the relativity of silence's function across various speech communities, in the West and elsewhere.

The groundbreaking work of Basso (1972), Saville-Troike (1985), and Braithwaite (1990) demonstrated that by contrasting mainstream Western uses and interpretations of silence with more marginal, less explored practices of the purposive withholding or avoidance of speaking researchers and readers could gain valuable knowledge about various linguistic and cultural worldviews. This research opened the door for many other comparative studies that continued—and continue—to explore the differences and similarities in the uses of silence across cultures. Thus, anthropological methodologies that investigated alternative understandings of silence (and of speaking) (Basso, 1972; Pratt & Wieder, 1993) have been joined by communication approaches that focus on describing and interpreting intercultural encounters and the misunderstandings that can arise in their course (Carbaugh, 2005; Coutu, 2008). Researchers have also explored the implications of ethnocentric interpretations of silence for minorities (Scollon & Scollon, 1981) although to a lesser degree, and only recently have we started to see some work at the intersections between ethnography and more macro-oriented approaches. This latter line of work introduces a much needed critical perspective from which to explore the implications of silence for the perpetuation of inequalities (Covarrubias, 2008). Below we discuss what we see as the overarching themes informing these different trends in the study of silence within the ethnography of communication.

The first basic premise of ethnographic study of silence has been a reaction against the lack of attention this practice had historically received in the study of communication. Thus, scholars in this tradition have pointed out that silence had been systematically conceptualized as the lack

of speech (Acheson, 2008; Saville-Troike, 1985; Scollon, 1985) which implies lack of meaning. The arbitrary opposition between the spoken word and its absence—where the former would be seen as communicative and the latter would not—has been rejected by ethnographers of communication on the basis of observation and detailed interpretations of the meanings of silence as they are enacted across speech communities (Braithwaite, 1990; Carbaugh, 1999; Carbaugh, Berry, & Nurmikari-Berry, 2006). A primary merit, then, of comparative work on silence within language and social interaction is that it has led to the (re)discovery of silence as a rich communicative practice by emphasizing the need to account for the functionality of not speaking in a variety of communicative events.

The second common driving force in the study of silence within the ethnography of communication is the endorsement and extension of Hymes's (1972) leitmotif that "one human group's theories of speaking can be best isolated by contrast with those of another" (p. 36). This has placed the ethnography of communication in a unique position from which to approach the study of silence. Thus, different "theories of silence" have emerged from different cultural positions—those of the participants—as alternatives to the better known Western understandings of this practice, showing how the meaning of silence may vary from one speech community to another. Following the approach to culture set in the works by Hymes (1962) and Philipsen (1992; see also Carbaugh, 1995), researchers have concentrated on understanding the meanings of silence in order to better describe the communicative particularities of a cultural group. Silence, in this view, constitutes an important part of the unique system of symbols and meanings in a community as a distinctive cultural entity. The comparative task of ethnographic research on silence has been to describe and understand these unique patterns of silence within a community, to be able to explain what these patterns mean for the individuals who experience a particular shared identity and to point out how these meanings differ from those prevalent in other speech communities.

The third shared concern in the ethnographic literature on silence is the managing of the tension between the commitment to capturing difference (the functional variation of linguistic resources within and across speech communities) and the concomitant desire to highlight similarities (that is, similarities of function, use, and cultural basis of use). These two seemingly opposing goals exist in a dialectical relationship: differences can be productively used to elucidate similarities, and similarities can serve as the background against which differences appear (Agar, 1994a, ch. 5). Even though the ethnography of communication, in general, refrains from prediction or generalization about interactional practices as its ultimate goal, our review also shows that this type of research consistently relies on transcultural theories of interaction in order to make valid claims about how cultures, and the uses of silence in them, differ. That being said, it is important to emphasize here that studies on silence within the ethnography of communication tradition have been mainly driven by an impulse to show how silence's meaning, function, and social consequentiality may vary across cultural contexts. Researchers' main goal has been to emphasize cultural differences although, in the process, similarities within a particular speech community have been stressed in order to set the bases for meaningful comparison (Carbaugh, 2005). Further, critical scholars working in the ethnography of communication tradition recognize that claims to universality are usually made about the interactional practices of non-Western cultures. Covarrubias (2007) calls for caution in making universal claims as such claims can lead to, or expose, Eurocentric bias in communication theories and research. The main consequence of such bias is the construction of a unified, undifferentiated "Other," positioned as existing in contrast to the dominant Western practices.

Two studies in particular have looked for commonalities across multiple cultures in order to find more solid evidence for their claims. Basso (1972) pointed out the need for more cross-cultural studies on silence in order to discern whether his general hypothesis that "[t]he

critical factor for the Apache's decision to speak or keep silent seems always to be the nature of his relationships to other people" (p. 306) could be applicable to other cultures. Braithwaite (1990) followed up on Basso's suggestion and tested whether his hypothesis could "account for behavior across cultures" (p. 322). Braithwaite concluded that, as a general rule, silence in communication served the function of providing protection against outsiders. These studies managed the intellectual tension between generalizing and particularizing claims by pointing out that the local applications of such universal principles may differ across cultures (Braithwaite, 1990).

Let us now turn to the review of these and other findings regarding the forms, meanings and implications of silence across cultures in greater detail. Basso's work broke new ground in the study of silence by focusing on some uses of this practice among the Western Apache of east-central Arizona. Drawing on ethnoscience and sociolinguistics, he described certain situations in which silence was used, to then offer an explanation of the interpretation and value of these uses within this Native American speech community. Basso set out to uncover and understand what kinds of cultural codes were active when the Western Apache engaged in particular communicative practices and to explain how these could violate mainstream American expectations. Based on his observations, he constructed a taxonomy of situations in which Apaches could be expected "to give up on words" (p. 307), offering native explanations for why silence was preferred on these occasions. His analysis led him to conclude that "[t]he underlying determinants of silence [were] in each case basically the same" (p. 315). Basso proffered the following hypothesis: "keeping silent in Western Apache culture is associated with social situations in which participants perceive their relationships vis-à-vis one another to be ambiguous and/or unpredictable" (p. 315). Braithwaite (1990) tried to take Basso's hypothesis further and used Hymes's analytic framework to review and compare eighteen ethnographic accounts of silence from 13 different speech communities including Senegal, New Zealand, urban America, and the Warm Spring Indian reservation. His goal was to find out whether there was a pattern, that is, where the uses and interpretations of silence in these different cultures were "similar, where they were different, and where they were systematically related" (p. 323). Braithwaite concluded that there was indeed such a pattern, namely "the perception that the other is of a recognizable different status" (p. 324) active in the use of silence. The inclusion of the role of power and status, according to Braithwaite, both supported and extended Basso's hypothesis regarding the uses of silence and the possibility of cross-cultural generalization.

Saville-Troike (1985) provided a theoretical basis for cross-cultural comparative research on silence by introducing a communicatively-oriented, descriptive taxonomy useful in accounting for the different dimensions, structures, semantics, semiotics, and acquisitions of silence. Her work attempts to "include and distinguish functions or events that are relevant to different levels of social action" (p. 16). With this goal in mind, she introduced a classification of etic categories for the analysis of silence. She identified these categories on the basis of silence's macro and micro functions, the type of event in which it occurred and the kinds of participants involved in such events. Saville-Troike described her work as one that allows researchers to explain human communication, in broad terms, and also to apply these etic categories cross-culturally.

Besides investigating the cultural meanings of silence in particular speech communities, Carbaugh's extensive comparative work on silence sought to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing the role of silences in observable interactions in intercultural situations. In this body of work his emphasis is on invisible cultural differences as possible sources of miscommunication. More specifically, he concentrates on intercultural encounters between mainstream American speakers and Finnish (Carbaugh et al., 2006) or native American conversational partners such as the Blackfeet (Carbaugh, 1999, 2005) or the Apache (Carbaugh & Wolf, 1999). Through detailed analysis of interactional encounters, this type of research aims to transform common misunderstandings

due to lack of knowledge of different conversational systems into "visible understandings" (Carbaugh, 2005, p. xxii). By means of description, interpretation, and critique of discursive practices in several speech communities, Carbaugh identified specific cultural premises (2005, p. 113) that captured the different beliefs and moral orientations of participants in intercultural exchanges. In his discussion of the non-oral Blackfeet communicative practice of "listening" to nature, for example, he points out that communication in this community of speakers is not a synonym for talking, but "an active way of being in the world" (p. 83). This interpretation, Carbaugh claims, stands in contrast with the mainstream U.S. American expressive system that equates communication with speaking in almost every situation. For the Blackfeet, however, "listening" belongs to the category of communicative practice and functions, therefore, as a discursive and cultural resource, one that allows participants in a conversation to connect with the landscape around them. This incommensurability of worldviews, according to Carbaugh, is bound to create tensions that could be eased with a better understanding of where they come from.

Studies of silence within the ethnography of communication framework have also addressed competing interpretations of silence within a single speech community. The main argument of this type of proposal is that, in any given speech community, interpretations of silence may rely on more than one speech code available to interlocutors (Coutu, 2008).

Other studies in educational settings have added an explicitly stated critical edge to their interpretations of the ways in which different communities use silence. Such research explores what happens when these communities encounter each other within a context of power imbalances such as the college classroom. Covarrubias (2008) focuses on the experiences of American Indian students in order to give an account of discrimination in the classroom from the point of view of those who experience it. Drawing on the ethnography of communication and Whiteness theory (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) she presents a detailed look at the "microdynamics of prejudice" (p. 228) as they unfold in daily interactions. Based on in-depth interviews in which students recall a series of uncomfortable episodes, her main argument is that college professors contribute to the marginalization of minorities, and more specifically of Native Americans, by engaging in "'discriminatory silence': the public or private withholding of speech, specifically the withholding of voiced objections to statements that dismiss, disconfirm, or alienate a person because of racial, ethnic, or cultural origin when the ethical action would be to speak up" (p. 246).

As this brief survey of findings shows, comparative ethnography of communication studies of silence have answered differently to the questions of what to study and for what purpose. These choices, of course, have important implications for the evaluation of what the ethnography of communication has to offer, as a whole and in its particular thematic orientations, to comparative research in general and the study of silence in particular. Next we offer a classification of the findings sketched above according to the subject matter and educational goals of comparative study. We distinguish between three approaches to comparative research in the ethnography of communication along these dimensions: the comparative study of parallel, engaged, and unjust expressive systems. Our system of classification is not designed to position various approaches as mutually exclusive but to facilitate the discussion of the implications of the ways in which they employ comparative research.

A number of the studies we reviewed above were primarily interested in the exploration of different uses of silence in other cultures. For these researchers, and in concordance with the ethnography of communication's core principles, the main impulse has been to offer a native account of the uses of silence in a particular community with the purpose of illuminating its unknown meanings or broadening external interpretations of it. One crucial purpose of this type of study is to place two different cultures in an imaginary dialogue. The goal of such a conversation is twofold: on the one hand, it presents the interpretation of unknown practices in an effort to invite

mainstream societies to understand and (re)valorize them. These studies imagine speech commu-
nities as parallel expressive systems active in speech communities whose members are potentially
capable of understanding each other's ways of speaking and also potentially capable of engaging
one another on the basis of that understanding. Parallel systems approaches to silence are largely
based on an East/West dichotomy (Acheson, 2007) and thus tend to highlight the similarities of
non-Western communities to then juxtapose them to Western ways of communicating.

A second group of studies interested in the subject of engaged expressive systems focuses on
silence in encounters where members of two or more speech communities or users of competing
speech codes actually interact. As opposed to the previous group of studies these comparative
analyses do not simply place parallel cultural systems in imaginary dialogue with one another,
rather their object of study are observable intercultural exchanges. The main goal of this type
of research is to illuminate ways in which various cultural interpretations of the functionality
and value of silence can lead to divergent uses of this resource. Ultimately, these studies are
motivated by the intent to shed light on possible sources of intercultural miscommunication.
As Carbaugh (2005) puts it, "[e]thnographic studies of intercultural communication can help us
understand how different cultural orientations relate to practices of living" (p. 95). This primar-
ily descriptive and interpretive perspective aims at understanding the complexities involved in
our daily interactions. Much as comparative studies of parallel systems, these studies invite us
to reflect on what we presume about communication on a day-to-day basis, to keep in mind the
value of different practices in specific places. However, the educational objective of these studies
is more practice-oriented. They are designed to instill in readers an awareness of the alterna-
tive cultural meanings and values of silence, and of the realization of systems of meanings and
hierarchies of value in interaction, in order to help them achieve a stance of curiosity and open-
mindedness toward differences in interactional practices in their own intercultural encounters. In
Carbaugh's words, "[b]y attending to the role of discursive practices in individual and cultural
lives ... perhaps we can create a better understanding of communication, especially of each about
the other" (2005, p. 116).

A third and final tendency (still in its early stages) present in the ethnography of communica-
tion literature we reviewed concerns the comparative exploration of injustice or, more precisely,
of the role of silence as an agent of power and discrimination. In an earlier study, Scollon and
Scollon (1981) had already pointed out the consequences of imposing dominant understand-
ings of silence onto marginalized groups—in their case, the Athabaskan community. However,
it has not been until recently that we have seen productive moves to integrate the ethnography of
communication with other approaches in order to offer a more critical approach to these issues.
Covarrubias (2008) offers a productive blending of interpretive approaches from the ethnography
of communication with critical Whiteness theories (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Her account
shows how such combination can add a much needed detailed examination of structures usually
discussed at macro-levels. Unlike the studies described above, this type of approach does not
tend to stop at the level of description and/or interpretation but exhibits some hope for interven-
tion and critique. As Covarrubias emphasizes with regard to her own research, her goal goes
beyond the identification of specific uses of silence in the context of U.S. higher education toward
working together in order to construct "more equitable contexts in higher education" (p. 229).
Covarrubias invites readers to consider the negative social consequentiality of silence from some
cultural members' perspectives by capturing their non-dominant interpretations of silence and by
exposing the disadvantage they suffer as a result of the dominance of uses and interpretations of
silence they do not, or cannot, endorse.

As our survey of literature has shown, comparative ethnographic research on silence offers
a distinctive approach that has produced valuable contributions to the study of social interaction.
This research demonstrated that silence is an important interactional resource whose use consti-

tutes socially consequential interactional practices. Further, it has demonstrated that the functions
of this resource and the consequentiality of its use vary across speech communities. Finally, it
provides illustrations of Hymes's (1972) claim that "[l]anguage as such is not everywhere equiva-
lent in role and value: speech may have different scope and functional load in the communicative
economies of different societies" (p. 39).

After a brief survey of the state of the art in comparative ethnography of communication
research, we now turn to review limitations of and some new developments in the comparative
study of social interaction from a cultural perspective.

LIMITATIONS

Two pieces of criticism directed against the ethnographic study of language use are ethnogra-
phy's reluctance to make universal claims about the functioning of language in society on the
basis of comparative analysis (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996) and to engage in the critique of the
interactional practices it describes (Fiske, 1990). Dell Hymes (1980) acknowledges these criti-
cisms. In an earlier part of this chapter we have already pointed out that the ethnography of com-
munication's preference for the description of the particular does not mean that it denies the value
of the universal. Ethnographers of communication continue to tap into transcultural theories of
social interaction in order to elucidate the communicative practices of cultural members, and they
see undeniable value in affirming or correcting these theories in the light of findings. As the ex-
ample of Basso's and Braithwaite's research on silence illustrates, they are also interested in the
construction of cross-culturally applicable hypotheses. They do, however, see universal claims as
perennially subject to falsification in the light of new findings about the interactional practices of
particular speech communities. The principal value of universal claims, from the ethnography of
communication's perspective, lies in their capacity to illuminate the ever-changing local expres-
sive systems and their cultural foundations.

With regard to critique, Philipsen (1991) in his response to Fiske emphasizes that the eth-
nography of communication is "committed to a methodological stance from which one would
insist that the social class, regional and racial characteristics of the interlocutors are brought into
the interpretation only insofar as these can be revealed to be operative elements for the interlocu-
tors themselves, as revealed in some way in the interlocutors' observed behavior" (p. 327). Our
discussion of Covarrubias's (2008) work on masked silence sequences indicated that a compara-
tive approach to social interaction can successfully inform the ethnographically based critique
of communicative practice according to Philipsen's methodological criterion. By comparing and
contrasting non-dominant (Native American) interpretations of silence with a dominant "White-
ness-infused code of conduct" she steers clear of the simplifying imposition of externally con-
ceived interpretive frameworks of discrimination on the complex social situation. Instead, she
captures the dimensions of social disadvantage from those communal members' perspective who
directly experience that disadvantage as the consequence of particular uses of silence. This ethno-
graphic mode of cultural criticism can also have only limited ambitions for the large-scale gener-
alization of findings—a limitation that the ethnography of communication does not conceive of
as a deficiency of its own research agenda (Hymes, 1980).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future directions in the comparative study of social interaction include the reconsideration of
the "culture" and "speech community" concepts and explorations of the possibility of cross-case

analysis. Agar's (1994b) critique of the use of the "culture" concept in ethnographic studies of language use has important implications for what we referred to above as the comparative study of engaged expressive systems. Agar points out that "culture" in these situations may function as an interpretive device for the interlocutors themselves. Regarding "culture" itself as a locally relevant construct instead of an externally imposed analytic concept can help the analyst capture the dynamics of intercultural interaction with greater precision and nuance. Building on Agar's argument we speculate that it may very well be the case that miscommunication is sometimes occasioned, at least in part, by interlocutors' divergent conceptions of what it means to interact with a member of another "culture." Going a step further, it is possible that for members of some speech communities "culture" and "intercultural contact" are not at all relevant ways of thinking about communicating with people from elsewhere. Milburn (2004) proposes a similar line of thinking about Hymes's "speech community" concept. She argues that, instead of attempts to determine the boundaries of speech communities on the basis of externally conceived criteria, ethnographers should pay more attention to "tracing the ways that participants label themselves as members of a particular community" (p. 420). The utility of such an orientation to speech community is, once again, greater descriptive precision. Finally, Scollo (2004) argues for the utility of cross-case, as opposed to cross-cultural, comparative ethnographic research.

Let us make a few concluding remarks about the character of comparative research in language and social interaction. First, the most robust comparative work done in language and social interaction compares language use across linguistic and/or cultural boundaries. Second, our review of ethnographic research on silence demonstrates that language and social interaction research values all positions along the corrective–constitutive spectrum, and has equal interest in identifying universals of language use and the local, cultural inflections of those universals. Finally, we hope that besides carefully staking out their differences, language and social interaction researchers will also heed Levinson's (2005) argument that the comparative study of sociocultural systems, interaction systems, and language systems are equally significant and complementary.

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