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Ethnography of Communication

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The ethnography of communication (EC) is an approach to the study of language and social interaction. Used by an international network of scholars, EC is based upon a set of philosophical assumptions, employs a refined conceptual framework and a unique

methodology, and has produced a wide range of findings about communication, language, and social interaction from around the world. Various intellectual problems motivate the approach; these include not only the culturally distinctive nature of communication, language, and social interaction, but its general properties as well. To reiterate, EC seeks to discover not only the cultural particularities of communication, but also its general principles. Particular cases and general properties, in turn, help refine the ever-developing approach. This dual attention to particularities and generalities has generated knowledge about the uses and interpretations of a wide variety of communication phenomena: address terms, dialogue, discourses of difference, computer-mediated communication, enactments of the unsayable, gossip, hate speech, identity or face management, silence, metacommunication, narrative, social media, person reference, and political speech—to name only a few. The approach treats various channels of communication such as sound, sight, or smell and various instruments of communication such as spoken or written words, electronically mediated images, gestures, or other sense abilities as possibly communicative, with their uniquely situated configuration in need of exploration. In this way the approach foregrounds locally situated means and meanings of communication as its primary analytical concern and does not necessarily, a priori, privilege language alone, as the site of social interaction. The importance of this point will become clearer as this article is developed.

The article discusses briefly the history of the approach, presents its basic assumptions, reviews basic parts of its conceptual framework and methodological procedures, presents some of its recent developments, and elucidates various findings from the EC literature.

Historical overview

As a program of research, EC has a 50-year history to look back on (Carbaugh, 2008; Philipsen and Carbaugh, 1986). The program was founded collaboratively by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes. In 1962 Hymes published a chapter that called for a new area of study, a kind of linguistics that explored language not just as a formal system of grammar, but as something culturally shaped in the contexts of social life. At the same time he called for a kind of anthropology that took speaking as its focal subject matter. The two interests, together, helped establish an innovative enterprise, a kind of linguistic study that was grounded in the social life of language; and, in turn, a kind of cultural study focused on speaking and, eventually, communication generally. In 1964 Hymes and his colleague John Gumperz published a special section of the journal *American Anthropologist* on the subject, which in 1972 formed the basis of a highly influential reader on the subject, even as it pioneered a general path for ethnographic studies of communication (see Gumperz & Hymes, 1972).

In the 1970s collections of research reports on the ethnography of communication were published that helped move such study from the periphery of some disciplines like anthropology, linguistics, sociology, speech communication, and rhetoric to more central concerns in the study of communication and culture. These research reports explored aspects of communication that were often overlooked—such as gender role

enactment, the social processes of litigation, marginalized linguistic styles, social uses of verbal play, and culturally distinctive styles of speaking. By the late 1980s and 1990s, a bibliography of over 250 research papers on the ethnography of communication was published. This program of research demonstrated how communication was a culturally distinctive activity; at the same time it also examined general issues, such as how communication varied by social agent and class, how it occurred on and about popular movies, how talk was done on television, as well as relationships between speaking and silence, intercultural interactions, Native American poetics, political speech, verbal dueling, and verbal arts generally. The early pleas for EC research by Gumperz and Hymes were heard as various studies were carried out and theory and analytic procedures were refined.

Philosophical assumptions about communication, language, and social interaction

Hymes's early chapter, published in 1962, developed notions that were at the time rather radical. In the face of many who thought that everyday speaking and language use were largely improvisational and creative activities, Hymes argued that they did indeed have structure and that that structure could be understood by formulating patterns or rules of use; in the wake of general theories about abstract properties of language, he and John Gumperz saw value in studying cultural particularities, actual practices grounded in the contexts of speech communities. Following the developing logic, speaking was understood to be systemically organized, traceable through rules of practice, yet culturally particular and thus cross-culturally variable. These starting points have proven highly productive for initiating the ethnography of speaking and the ethnography of communication.

As the ethnography of communication developed, its main assumptions have rested firmly on specific foundations. Here we briefly present some current originating insights; more detailed explications of them are available elsewhere (e.g., Carbaugh, 1995).

First, ethnographers of communication have discovered that *communication is what people have made of it*. For some, communication is confined to human action or intentionality; for others, animals are also expressive agents, as may be the wind and the water, and each is deemed a source of important messages. There are several dimensions to this point: agents of communication can be not only human but also nonhuman entities; sequential structure can include contiguous and noncontiguous speech actions by those present and/or by those not present; meanings of agents and act sequences are not simply denotative, but can be deeply symbolic, as the nature of communication action includes common knowledge of prior and subsequent action; cultural knowledge about communication is built with participants' knowledge features such as these. For these and other reasons, communication is understood to be the result of a constructive, ever-changing process in which humans conceive of and evaluate social life on the basis of their specific, local beliefs about what exists and values as to how such conduct should be done.

Second, when practiced by humans, *communication exhibits systemic social organization*. As people go about structuring their communication together, they create and presume features of social organization. This draws attention to communication as activating social conventions in both conduct and interpretation. Additionally, communication conduct exhibits particular social identities and relationships, as for instance in the use of titles and address terms. As communication and language are being used among people, so they organize themselves, creating human beings, bonds, and institutions.

It is possible to study communication, language, and social interaction as social constructions, as socially patterned in sequences, as exhibiting roles and identities, and so on, without attending to the participants' meanings, which are being presumed in that very action, or the cultural form believed to be demonstratively active as people indeed so act. This, however, would fail as ethnography. Why? An essential quality of the ethnography of communication is the knowledge that speakers are acting upon when they communicate: what they take themselves to be doing in that very act or sequence, its nature as a form, its meanings as an action. Ethnographers wonder: What must be presumed, and created, by these people when they are communicating as they are? When they are saying what they say?

This introduces our third assumption: that communication is to a large degree culturally distinctive in its nature, functions, forms, and meanings. In a nutshell, *communication, language, and social interaction are deeply and radically cultural*. The point is thoroughly documented in the ethnographic literature, with emphases on cultural dialectics, functions, forms, styles, devices, codes, discourses, and so on. Attention to each brings into view what people in their historically situated, socially interactive places have said, in their particular ways, through their own meanings, about precedents, politics, and predicaments (Boromisza-Habashi, 2013).

Finally, Hymes coined the phrase "way of speaking" by combining the Whorfian phrase "fashion of speech" with the colloquial expression "way of life." In that phrase he offered a conceptualization of ways of local speech as presuming and recreating ways of life. Today we could echo the point by saying that *communication is formative of social and cultural lives*. In other words, as we communicate, we give shape and meaning to our lives and landscapes, from our ideas about history to our religious beliefs, our political stances, our institutions of medicine and law. The languages and other communicative means we use expressively form the meanings we share and contest about our social and cultural worlds. Seen in this way, communication is formative of our social and cultural lives.

The basic theoretical framework

Dell Hymes (1972) formulated a theory for the description and explanation of language and sociocultural lives. The general program involved conceptualizations of language as a communication practice, including ways of studying that practice through a special Hymesian version of componential analysis, as well as various uses of the framework. Each is discussed in turn.

One of the challenges Hymes faced was inducing an understanding of phenomena in the world as culturally based communication phenomena while drawing on linguistic and anthropological field reports. To do so, he needed a conceptual vocabulary for organizing an understanding of the world for purposes of ethnographic inquiry. One idea he formulated is the *communication event*, a sequence of acts with cultural integrity. A second one is *communication act*, which draws attention to the specific actions being performed by participants, typically in sequential ways. A third is *communication situation*, which is a place for speaking and may involve multiple acts and events. A fourth is *speech community*, which identifies a social grouping made possible by those who share rules for the use and interpretation of a communication practice or a language variety. Last, one may usefully understand a sociocultural practice as a *way of speaking*, this being a means to identify patterned ways in which a language can be used.

These concepts — communication event, communication act, communication situation, speech community, and way of speaking — offer ways of conceptualizing linguistic and social interactional processes. But these are not the only concepts Hymes discussed. He also mentioned (among other things) the idea of a *speech repertoire* as an analytic resource for identifying the range of competencies a speaker or speakers may command, and *speech economy* as the description of how speech communities assign value to the means of speech (such as dialects and other speech patterns) and how access to valued means can vary across social groups within speech communities. The point is that ethnographers typically understand the object of their study in a variety of ways, and this variety illustrates how communication is shaped and formed. Below we discuss developments of additional concepts that follow Hymes's lead.

Of course, just understanding a practice like a political debate or a conversation as a communication event offers a useful starting point. But how specifically might one examine the thing that people call "a political debate" or "a conversation"? Hymes proposed specific components as a way of understanding the ingredients or parts of communication practice. He put these parts in the form of a memory device, each specific component corresponding to a letter of the word SPEAKING. S stands for setting; P for participants; E for ends (understood as both goals and outcomes); A stands for acts, act sequences, topic, and form; K for the key or emotional pitch; I for the instruments used to communicate, from speech to drumming to ravens and the wind; N for norms of both conduct and interpretation; and G for genre (as in generic forms).

The SPEAKING device was proposed by Hymes as "a series of questions to be asked" about a communication practice (like the event of a political debate), in order to grasp the multifaceted features of its social and cultural enactment. In this way, for example, in order for a political debate to be understood, one could note and further analyze its physical setting, the various participants involved in it, its goals and outcomes, its sequential structure — including the topics and forms of expression, how they are keyed, the various instruments used, the norms for "debating" and for interpreting "debating" that are in play when the debate is happening — and then develop one's sense of debate as a generic form. In other words, when ethnographers conduct such a componential analysis, they give systematic attention to a range of ingredients active in communication practice in order to understand which ones are pivotal and how each one varies in

the social unit under consideration—be that communication act, event, or situation. We could characterize this use as a largely descriptive use of the components.

The SPEAKING device has other uses too, in addition to description: It can be used as an interpretive device. Here the questions asked are not simply in the hands of the ethnographer as an observer of human communication; they also serve the essential ethnographic task of interpreting the meanings that participants associate with that communication. Playing with the device a bit, we turn now to ask about S—the scene of the communication: what the people who are communicating say or think they are doing as they are doing it. Similarly, we can ask about the ways participants in the practice characterize those participants (P) who are so engaged—both as they do so, if they do so, naturally in the event itself, and also with an additional curiosity about how they do so outside of it. Ethnographers of course acknowledge that the enactments of participant identities within a practice and the subsequent reports about them are not identical discursive tasks. The next component invites the ethnographer to study what ends (E) or goals are expressively presumed in a communication practice and to explore whether actual outcomes are aligned or not with those expressed goals. The ethnographer may also explore members' notions of acts (A) and act sequences in a similar manner; thus member categories—declared genres (G), forms, and meanings—come into view. Next comes the ethnographer's attention to the beliefs and values that are in play, including indigenous notions of the communication's key (K). What ideas about instruments (I) are available to participants as they engage in this practice: what instruments or channels are employed, what instruments could be employed but are not, what instruments cannot or should not be employed. All these can be completely obvious to members as they do what they do. Similarly, what norms (N) do participants "hear" to be active in the communication practice? How is this practice conceived of and evaluated? The point here is that the memory device of SPEAKING has different uses: Some emphasize descriptive analyses of what has happened, others are much more interpretive, emphasizing the meanings that the participants get in the communication practice while it's happening. This distinction between descriptive and interpretive analyses is developed below.

An additional use made explicit by Hymes was the need for a framework that makes comparative study of communication practices easier. Having studies that use the components explicitly has been an invaluable aid in such cross-cultural study, as cross-cultural studies have demonstrated (e.g., Basso, 1990; Braithwaite, 1990; Carbaugh, 2005).

A field-based methodology

Ethnographies of communication have a particular way of designing field research. This way involves specific sets of tasks pertaining to prefieldwork activities, fieldwork itself, and postfieldwork. Throughout this process, four phases of theorizing about communication, language, and social interaction are identifiable. We have discussed the process as cyclical and systematic, given how ethnographers work their ways through field-specific activities (Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992).

Prefieldwork activities position the ethnographer with special knowledge about communication, language, and social interaction. EC researchers study how communication can be understood as a sociocultural phenomenon. This involves careful examination of ethnographic theory pertaining to communication and sensitivity to particular intellectual problems such as the cultural sequencing of social interaction, metapragmatic terms, emotion expression, cultural uses and interpretations of silence, narrative form, address terms, pronominal usage, and so on. In the process, EC researchers become well versed in understanding communication generally and its study through various acts, events, and forms. Furthermore, the ethnographer studies EC literature about cultural practices of communication around the globe, including those about the field in which one seeks to study. This phase of prefieldwork gives the EC researcher a general orientation to language and social interaction, knowledge of various communication practices, and insight into local knowledge about the use and meanings of those practices.

As the EC researcher enters *the field*, several activities become important. After a period of rapport-building, one begins collecting data through observation, interviewing, survey, archival work, and so on. These data are audio- and video-recorded whenever possible and transcribed through a system best designed for the specific phenomenon being studied and the specific analytic purpose at hand. While in the field, then, the ethnographer begins analyzing data through the Hymesian components discussed above and by other appropriate means. Time in the field sensitizes the EC investigator to the place of language and social interaction (LSI) phenomena in social and cultural lives, to their role in forming meaningful social action, and to the larger culturescape perhaps at play in, before, and after, the practice of communication. Also during fieldwork, the ethnographer, through the deliberately open, investigative process, may discover related phenomena to explore. Some time may also be dedicated to initial stages of writing.

Postfieldwork activities involve intensive analyses typically begun in the field. This phase often involves trips back to the field in both the intellectual sense, by consulting scholarly literature, and the physical sense, when one returns to the site to collect additional data. Various research products in the phase might be produced including films, various types of written reports, oral performances, and so on to meet the demands of particular audiences.

Note that the above sequencing of research activities draws attention to stages that are in some sense linear, but also cyclical. Any stage of activity, once entered, becomes a potential point of return. We want to make explicit that the process described above involves four distinct phases of theorizing communication, language, and social interaction. We have summarized these four phases through the memory device BASE, where each letter stands for a kind of openly textured theorizing that provides context for, and is informed by, the others. Let us mention each briefly.

One kind of theorizing establishes an assumptive and *basic orientation to communication* and language use itself. We have touched upon all this when we discussed the philosophical foundations of EC above. Here it is important to emphasize the ethnographic attitude. The idea is not to declare in advance what one will find, but to understand what is found as the result of a human social creation, as organizing social life in

some ways, as infused with cultural meanings, and as playing a role in a way of life. The basic orientation is an investigative one.

A second kind of theorizing is focused on particular *activities, sequences, or communication practices*. Attention moves here from a general orientation toward communication to a focus on more specific communication practices, linguistic devices, or sequential forms. For example, any ethnographer may find it productive to focus on cultural forms of narrative, terms of address, or sequential expressions of the unsayable. In order best to do so, a familiarity with the literature of such communication actions may prove helpful. The theoretical attitude that EC employs at this stage of theorizing is structured and systematic and seeks the best way to explore narratives, address terms, or sequences: a way that is open and investigative, designed to discover the nature and meaning of communication in a given case.

Note that these first two types of theorizing, while sensitive to cultural variability, are acultural formulations. The basic orientation to communication and the specific theories about communication activities are both designed, like the Hymesian components, to capture general principles about communication and specific communication activities. In terms familiar to some (and as formulated by Kenneth Pike), the first two types of theory provide the analyst with an etic framework, that is, general ingredients at play in such practices across cases and cultural contexts. But this is only a part of the picture. The ethnographer is interested in using that etic framework, for instance the memory device mentioned above, to search the grounds of knowledge in particular cultural scenes of communication, of language, and of social interaction. In other words, the etic framework is the basis for formulating an emic account; both work together.

This introduces a third stage of theorizing: the construction of a field-based, *situated theory of a communication practice*. Here the formulation is of a local pattern of practice as people have produced and interpreted it, for instance speaking “like a man” in Teamsterville (Philipsen, 1992), “talking straight” in Israeli Sabra culture (Katriel, 1986), or telling a “palanca” narrative among urban Colombians (Fitch, 1998). Note that the objective here is to theorize the general way in which some communication practice gets done in a scene or community, what that practice means to those who produce it, and how it plays structurally in the social flow of life there. This, the situated or folk theory of communication, demonstrates the yield of an EC view of communication generally (its basic orientation) and the yield of more specific theorizing about gender role enactment, facework, and narrative, for example. We note a literary dynamic, as the “situated theory” is typically the amplified feature in ethnographic reports about communication. As a result, it is at times easy to miss the other—for example, the etic—levels of theorizing at play in the fieldwork and in the field report, unless these are made explicit.

A final type of theorizing consists in a kind of assessment that is based upon the relationship between the specific, culturally situated theory and the more general activity theory. This involves a kind of reflexive *evaluation of the activity theory*. Is the general theory adequate for *this* particular case? Or, more specifically, is the general theory of narrative in use adequate for the description and interpretation of this situated case? Katriel’s (1986) study of “talking straight” found Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness useful for analyzing potentially face-threatening acts of *dugri* speaking; but Katriel

also found the framework limited in its treatment of the speaker’s and the hearer’s face dynamics. The Israeli case, then, provided a perspective for a kind of theoretical assessment of the general theory, its scope conditions, and its cultural necessity. In this way the situated theory provides a concrete empirical case for theorizing at levels of particularity and of generality.

As Hymes often put the matter, EC is designed to particularize from a general framework, but also to generalize from the particularities of the case (Hymes, 1972). In our terms here, this involves specific types of theorizing at the base of EC studies: moving from an acultural etic framework—the basic orientation—to an activity theory through fieldwork, then to an emic-based situated account, then back to an etic evaluation or evolution of that theory.

In these ways, EC is erected on a philosophical foundation concerning communication, language, and social interaction, which theorizes about various social actions, highlights the situated nature of such action, and uses this knowledge to theorize further about various phenomena of concern. The EC theory and methodology has proven an invaluable heuristic over the years; it has been developed in a variety of ways. To some of those developments we now turn.

Developments: The theory of cultural communication

Gerry Philipsen’s early programmatic statement about the relationship between culture and communication (Philipsen, 1987) sets the stage for a new era in ethnography of communication research in the communication discipline. The experience of cultural communication in those who live it, Philipsen explained, oscillated between the competing desires for free, independent, individual agency and the constraints of communal life. Philipsen argues that societies move along this continuum, which stretches between the desire for individual agency and the competing obligations of communal life. Western societies, Philipsen noted, have been moving toward the extreme of complete individual freedom and away from communal belonging. It is important to note that here Philipsen was not advocating the widely accepted distinction between individualistic and collectivistic societies. From his perspective, the individualism–collectivism distinction is not a predictor of human behavior; rather it is best thought of as a dialectical exploratory frame, a strategy to be used in making sense of patterned conduct in particular speech communities but to be discarded if found not to have sufficient explanatory power.

Philipsen argued that western societies’ gradual movement toward the individual extreme on the continuum invited six types of cultural critiques that target observable communication practices. First, societies in the West have come to assign greater value to intimate, private communication as opposed to communication in public. Concern with successful communication among speakers in close or intimate relationships outweighs a parallel concern with successful public communication. Second, the decline in the use of honorific titles marks a shift from a concern with “honor” (a person’s attained or ascribed position in society) to a concern with “dignity” (a person’s integrity as a unique individual) as the prime motivator of human action. Third, attention to the rules of public expression appears to be decreasing in the West. Public expression is

increasingly thought of as the public release of private thoughts, and not as a carefully planned public performance. Fourth, Philipsen noted a decline in individuals' capacity to coordinate their actions in institutional contexts with reference to common goals and shared values. Fifth, individuals increasingly bear the burden of making sense of their experiences on their own individual terms and of constructing their own social universes for themselves. As a result of widely shared meanings, people are faced with too many choices and are often frustrated by the energy they are required to invest in exercising excessive liberty. Finally, time-honored standards and forms of expression are sacrificed for the sake of incessant talk.

In response to these critiques, Philipsen proposed a "programmatically treatment of cultural communication as an emerging problem of contemporary communication theory, research, and practice" (Philipsen, 1987, p. 248). As a theoretical concept, cultural communication offers a view that highlights the communal function of communication. In particular, cultural communication calls attention to three problems for communication study (meaning, alignment, and form), to three perspectives, respectively, on those problems (as code, conversation, and community), to the function of cultural communication (the creation and affirmation of shared identity), to forms of cultural communication (such as ritual, myth, and social drama), and to a typology of societies based on the prominence of particular forms of cultural communication (personal, positional, and traditional).

From the perspective of culture as *code*, the study of culture focuses on "a system of beliefs, values, and images of the ideal" (p. 249). Culture as code brings order to the life of a social group. By contrast, culture as *conversation* functions as a source of dynamism and creativity in the daily life of the group. Conversation "emphasizes a patterned representation of a people's lived experience of work, play, and worship" (p. 249). Cultural codes and conversations highlight how communication has the capacity to constitute communities. The study of culture as *community* is attentive to "concrete settings and scenes where codes are learned and where the communal conversation is played out" (p. 249). These three perspectives offer the basis for accounting for the creation and affirmation of communal identities by means of the use of cultural codes in situated conversations. Cultures as communities are located variously along a code-conversation axis, depending on their emphasis on the enactment of ordered, ideal communication (code) or individual, context-bound, transformative creativity (conversation).

Cultural communication is capable of giving form to the creation and affirmation of shared identity in the community. Although the processes of creation and affirmation play out differently in different cultural communities, Philipsen argues that some communicative forms are available to speakers across communities. *Ritual*, as "a communication form in which there is a structured sequence of symbolic acts, the correct performance of which constitutes homage to a sacred object" (p. 250), affirms a community's sense of its own past. *Myth*, "a great symbolic narrative which holds together the imagination of a people and provides bases of harmonious thought and action" (p. 250), allows community members to relate the communal past to the present and to make sense of their own social lives as constitutive of, and constituted by, the community. Finally, *social drama* is a sequential communicative form that members of cultural communities around the world can use to "manifest concern with, and negotiate the

legitimacy and scope of, the group's rules of living" (p. 252). Communities often rely on social dramas in their attempt to reintegrate those members who violated communal norms. The prevalence of particular forms of cultural communication constitutes the cultural communication styles of particular cultural communities. *Personalistic* societies that prize individuality rely heavily on social dramas; *positional* societies that value group life generate and circulate the greatest amount of myths; and *traditional* societies that attach value to communal codes and traditions tend to make frequent use of rituals.

Speech code theory and analysis

Speech code theory is primarily concerned with the ways in which particular communication practices are culturally meaningful and with the social consequentiality of those meaningful practices. Philipsen and his associates conducted a number of ethnographic field studies to develop a particular facet of cultural communication: the theory of speech codes. In the early 1970s, Philipsen (1992) studied communicative practices in a working-class neighborhood of Chicago he called Teamsterville. The subsequent comparison of local practices with more mainstream practices in the United States led him to identify two competing codes—"socially constructed and historically transmitted system[s] of symbols and meanings pertaining to communication" (p. 8)—in contemporary US American society: a code of honor and a code of dignity. The Teamsterville code of honor assigns value to communication that (1) treats the community as a social hierarchy and (2) interprets and evaluates the conduct and identity of communal members as inhabitants of particular social positions within that hierarchy. By contrast, the mainstream code of dignity assigns value to communication that (1) treats the community as consisting of individuals with unique affective and cognitive attributes and (2) interprets and evaluates the conduct and identity of communal members as unique individuals. Whereas the code of honor highlights local social roles and ideals and individual persons' ability to inhabit those roles and to live up to those ideals, the code of dignity emphasizes differences among individual persons and their individual intents.

Katriel and Philipsen (1981) showed that the term "communication" was used in US American speech as a culturally coded category of interpersonal communication. Using Hymes's SPEAKING device, the authors claimed that in contemporary American usage "communication" referred to a ritual practice whose purpose was to bridge the gap between individual and community through the reaffirmation of individual identity. "Communication" was seen as interpersonal "work" and involved supportive interaction, as opposed to "mere talk" or "chit chat." Participants in "communication" rituals "sit down and talk" about a problem that one of the participants is currently experiencing. The ritual is initiated when one participant notices a problem in the life of another. The problem is usually seen as having an impact on the other participant's self. By asking the other participant (or participants) to "sit down and talk," the initiator of the ritual casts all participants as intimates. The setting of the ritual underscores the relationship of intimacy among participants. The act sequence of the ritual follows a pattern of initiation, acknowledgment, negotiation, and reaffirmation of identities. Successful participation in "communication" affirms a participant's status as a "good communicator" with a healthy self.

These and other empirical studies led Philipsen and his associates to develop speech code theory, a theory of the role of culture in shaping observable, situated communicative conduct. The most recent articulation of the theory (Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005) defines the speech code as “a system of socially constructed symbols and meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct” (p. 57). Speech codes function as a widely shared, structured, and ever-changing system of communicative resources that allow speakers to identify, make sense of, and evaluate their own and others’ communicative conduct inside and outside the boundaries of their speech communities.

Speech code analysts reconstruct speech codes from naturally occurring discourse, including spoken words and written texts. Working in a particular speech community, the analyst first catalogs a set of communicative resources, which members of the community observably use “to enact, name, interpret, and judge communicative conduct” (p. 57). Local metacommunicative vocabularies, explicit invocations of cultural norms, and the forms of cultural communication discussed above are considered especially rich data for such analysis. The fieldworker-analyst then develops a hypothesis or hypotheses (i.e., his or her formulation of a local speech code or codes) about how those resources constitute a *system* of communicative resources in the form of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules.

Cultural discourse theory and analysis

Cultural discourse theory is primarily concerned with communication practices used by people in situated scenes, the cultural sequencing of those in conversation, the cultural meanings that permeate communication practices in a speech community, and the social consequentiality of the presence of those meanings in social life. Donal Carbaugh developed this part of EC theory, of cultural discourses, in his first large-scale ethnographic study of US American patterns of speaking (Carbaugh, 1988). This cultural study of communication focused on two cultural discourses, one pertaining to personhood, the other to speaking itself. The first, discourse on personhood, he conceptualized as involving political, personal, and polemical codes. These coding practices give special attention to symbolic expressions of “the individual,” who makes “choices,” has a “self,” and fights against “traditional social roles.” The second, discourse about speaking itself, he conceptualized as involving a relational code of “sharing,” an informational code of “being honest,” each one being active, following the work of Katriel and Philipsen (1981), in the ritualized sequence of what participants called “communication.”

These discourses, Carbaugh argued, provided expressive forms for how mainstream Americans, the target audience of *Donahue*, made sense of the nature and characteristics of persons (as individuals with a unique self) and of speaking (as the interactional expression of self). Cultural discourses, Carbaugh showed, defined and shaped popular culture — politics, deliberations, decision-making, theorizing, and so on — through these communication practices. In Carbaugh (1988), cultural discourses were thus formulated as being intimately tied to cultural conceptions of persons, social relations, and speaking itself, as involving distinctive codes, as tied to native genres, as deeply metacultural enactments, which were further explicated as multilayered, polysemic yet

coherent, multifunctional, various yet particular in form, and deeply situated in history and its cultural scenes.

Two concepts central to cultural discourse theory (Carbaugh, Gibson, & Milburn, 1997) are communication practices and cultural premises. Carbaugh and associates defined communication practices as “pattern[s] of situated, message endowed action” (p. 6), which are used in particular cultural scenes or on culturally meaningful occasions. Their examples of communication practices included invoking and observing Puerto Rican standards of time (practice) at annual dinners organized by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Springfield, Massachusetts (cultural scene); and enacting the identity of the “critical” or “active student” (practice) in classes taught at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts (cultural scene). Cultural premises were discussed as presumed messages, which constitute an ongoing commentary about social interactional life as it is immanent in situated, culturally coded conversations. In this sense, cultural premises are formulations of shared understanding about some of the fundamental dimensions of human experience and expression — such as premises of being or personhood (identities), of acting (communicative action), of relating or sociation (social relations), of feeling or emoting, and of dwelling (living in place). In cultural discourse analyses these premises and practices are studied in a systematic and integrative manner, demonstrating how “communication is a systemic and formative part of sociocultural lives” (p. 4).

In a subsequent development of the theory, Carbaugh (2005), following Philipsen (1987), Fitch (1998), and others, explained that cultural discourses formulated as premises articulate relevant beliefs and values that render a particular utterance meaningful. Cultural discourses answer the question: “What must be presumed — believed and/or valued — in order for that contribution to the conversation to be indeed what it is for these participants[?]” (Carbaugh, 2005, p. 128). What participant meanings are being presumed for, and created in, conversational interaction? This type of orientation to culturally situated conversation is built upon several theoretical propositions and their corollaries, which exhibit the types of concerns cultural discourse analysts pursue in their studies:

Proposition 1: “*Conversation is a practice that can and should be described on its own, in its own right, while [one is] attentive to its discursive codes*” (p. 128). The description of actual segments, excerpts, or snippets of conversational practice should serve as a record of interaction (e.g., a transcript) and as an account of how that conversational practice indeed got done. The transcript or the video provides the toehold of the study in real-world phenomena, and thus serves as the descriptive record of it. Such an account of *this* conversation actually happening provides the inspectable basis for what is indeed relevant and meaningful to its participants. (It is also an inferior production relative to the original practice it purports to describe; but, for analytical reasons, it is the best that one can do.)

Proposition 2: “*Communication, conversation, and social interaction involves [sic] a complex metacultural commentary, explicitly and/or implicitly, about identities, actions, feelings, relations, and living in place*” (p. 129). For participants, ongoing social interaction can be understood through five semantic hubs of cultural discourse, which

are explicated in the five corollaries below. As any one of them becomes explicit as an interactional concern, the others may be implicitly active:

Corollary 1: "To begin, we can ask, in this practice of communication, through this discourse, who are we presumed or presented to be? *Corollary one: Conversation is a metacultural commentary about being, and identity, with messages about who we are — and should be — being coded into this practice of conversation*" (p. 129).

Corollary 2: "In this practice of communication, what are we doing, and what should we be doing? *Corollary two: Conversation is a metacultural commentary about acting, with messages about what we are doing, and should be doing, being coded into the practice of conversation*" (p. 130).

Corollary 3: "How do we feel about this practice of communication, in and about which we are engaged? *Corollary three: Conversation is a metacultural commentary about emotion, with messages about how we feel — and should feel — being coded into acts of conversation*" (p. 130).

Corollary 4: "How are we being related in this practice of communication? *Corollary four: Conversation is a metacultural commentary about relating, with messages about social relations being coded into acts of conversation*" (p. 130).

Corollary 5: "How does this communication relate us to places? *Corollary five: Conversation is a metacultural commentary about dwelling, with messages about living in place being coded into acts of conversation*" (p. 131).

Although Carbaugh formulated these propositions and corollaries with regard to social interactional conversational practices, the same propositions can be used as a template for the cultural discourse analysis of any form of language use, including the analysis of written or other discursive texts, including nonlinguistic (aspects of) interactions.

Cultural discourse analysts seek to answer general research questions: What local practices of communication are getting done by people in their situations and scenes? What are the local, cultural meanings of that communication practice or set of practices, and what cultural meanings are immanent in that practice or set of practices? One of the analyst's goals is to explicate the semantic contents of social interactions; and cultural discourse analysts do so by using a technical vocabulary. In order to build cultural premises, cultural discourse analysts can identify discursive hubs of being, acting, relating, feeling, and/or dwelling, each being activated through key cultural terms and concepts, in a local language that community members treat as significant. Such terms can be put together to form statements that participants take to represent their lifeworld. These statements are called *cultural propositions*; their formulation is to begin building interpretive claims based upon the descriptive record, while one is explicitly attending to participants' lexical rendering of (and in) the matter at hand. *Cultural premises* may be formulated subsequently as more abstract explications. *Semantic dimensions* (sets of opposing values that community members use so as to make sense of and evaluate communicative conduct) are also useful in the formulation of contrasting, contested, or conflicting premises of belief and value. *Cultural norms*, when formulated, help capture members' beliefs about what types of communicative conduct are preferable, permissible, prescribed, or prohibited in order to perform a task in a given cultural scene. In this

way cultural discourses entail description and interpretation of communication practices and of their meanings to participants. Communication or speech codes are systematic formulations based upon the formulations of cultural propositions, premises, dimensions, and/or norms.

The study of speech codes and cultural discourses represents kindred developments in the ethnography of communication. Speech code theory focuses the ethnographer's attention on the cultural meaningfulness of particular communication practices — that is, on how they are patterned, locally meaningful, locally recognized forms of language use. Cultural discourse theory provides a systematic framework for analyzing, in language and social interaction, how communication practice involves participants' meanings about who they are, what they are doing, what kinds of relationships exist among them, how they are feeling, and their relationships to places. And so we move ethnographically onward, to understanding communication, language, and social interaction as a radically coded and cultural practice.

SEE ALSO: Context; Cultural Discourse Studies; Cultural Persuadables; Editor's Introduction; Interactional Sociolinguistics; Interpersonal Ideology; Rich Points; Speech Codes Theory; Speech Community; Thick Description

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