Speech Community

TRUDY MILBURN
University of Washington, USA

The term speech community refers to a group of people who speak in a distinct, identifiable style. Developed in the field of linguistics, it has been used by sociolinguists, sociologists, anthropologist, as well as scholars in communication, ethnic studies, and education. Bloomfield (1935) first introduced the term in 1926. He defined a speech community as, "a group of people who interact through means of speech" (p. 42). Bloomfield's fuller explanation of the term includes the characteristics of the group, the language used, as well as research methods by which to study it.

Speech communities have been researched through linguistic methods that focused on habits and conventional actions, such as good manners, through careful observation and notation of lexical forms, and grammatical construction. Additional methods for collecting data about speech communities have ranged from direct participant observation, to interviews, to questionnaires, to historical texts, to written online messages. While initially statistics were reserved for analyzing changes to speech that occurred over time, they now feature as a more prominent method of analysis, especially related to recorded corpuses of speech.

Delimiting the boundaries of a speech community has always been an issue. For example, more common units of analysis like economic or political communities potentially overlap with a speech community. Since the main boundary marker for speech communities is language use, questions arise based on different factors, such as participants who may not have been born speaking the language they use, or those who may have been assimilated into their current speech community. Relatedly, residents living in one place have been the focus of speech community analysis. The possibility exists for two or more distinct speech communities to be present within the same location. For instance, a researcher may determine that the level and amount of interaction, or lack thereof, provides enough evidence for several speech communities within one town or city. In this way, research may range from large urban areas, such as London, to very small microregions, such as Moroviantown, Delaware, and the corresponding, unique ways of speaking within each area.

Speech communities vary by the demographics of their members. Bloomfield identified many of the categories, such as the age, gender, size, and density of the group's network, degree of proficiency of its members, as well as different professions of its members (from physicians to artists). Other examples include speech communities that have been defined based on their national or ethnic origin (from citizens of Sydney, Australia to those who claim Mexican American heritage). A speech community may include multiple demographic features, such as families with a broad age range. Alternately, a single demographic feature may be indicative of a speech community itself, such as teens who speak distinctly (age), or women who speak differently from men (gender). At times the roles one occupies may indicate a separate speech community, as teachers are distinct from students, or bridegrooms are distinct from parents of the

bride. Within particular religious groups, members of the speech community may even include a wide cast of nonhuman speakers such as deities and angels.

Once groups are recognized as speech communities, one begins to learn more about their evaluations, judgments, or attitudes toward other groups or speakers. Particular ways of speaking are designated as good or bad. However, not all value judgments fall along a positive/negative valence. Some people may have a romantic attachment to otherwise dispreferred forms. Alternately, some speech codes can be highly valued by some groups, such as criminals who share secret speech codes, but dispreferred by law-enforcement officials who lack access to that code.

Evolution of a research category

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the concept of speech community was refined by three important figures, Gumperz, Labov, and Hymes. Although their work formed the basis of all subsequent analyses, Labov's work has been the most prominently cited in current articles about speech communities.

Gumperz (1968) emphasized regular and frequent interaction and the way a speech community is "*set off from* similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage" (p. 381; emphases added). His definition has been used to examine the difference between monolingual and bilingual speakers, such as Spanish and English-speaking Mexican Americans, to understand the ways their heterogeneous composition transcends geography, but nevertheless distinguishes them from other groups.

Labov (1972) called attention to those who use shared norms for speaking, regardless of whether they were developed through agreement. Research in this tradition may examine entire languages, such as English (noticing it can be divided into standard and nonstandard forms), while others examine specific parts of language or linguistic varieties. The implications of particular ways of speaking may be related to social class or hierarchy, and by extension, standard forms may be place based. For instance, standard forms are used in public settings such as schools, churches, and courts of law, whereas nonstandard forms can be heard in private settings like the home or playground. Some research following these lines evolved based on the variations that began to distinguish different disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and education. Within the field of education, for example, some have set out to learn more about non-English or nonstandard English speech communities in order to improve the teaching of English, or English as a second language. The ability for speakers to recognize when code-switching is appropriate between two languages can be learned, and some examine specific multilingual communities, such as those who alternate between Wolof and French in Senegal, to learn more about their rules for choosing which language to use when.

Many particular linguistic variations have been examined over the years. These variations may be based on patterned use of insertions, alternations, tense-aspect markers, negation, repetition, inversion, and escalation. Others have studied the patterns of larger linguistic units such as accents, syntactic structures, morphological categories,

and phonological units. Speakers use contextualization cues in order to determine when to use each feature.

Scholars working in the Hymesian tradition begin with the social group as a "primary term" that translates into selecting a speech community and then conducting an analysis. Like Labov, Hymes's definition included shared rules for both producing and interpreting speech, but he centered more on the social aspect, rather than the linguistic. In 1974, Hymes discussed the difference between a participant and a member. He also placed a great deal of emphasis on the goal of speaking competence. In this vein, it is more important to learn about how the social group deems it is appropriate to say something, rather than saying something that is necessarily grammatically correct.

Hymes's tradition has flourished through researches using the ethnography of communication. Philipsen's (1975) research about Teamsterville first introduced the concept of a speech community into the communication discipline. Following his lead, Carbaugh (1993), Fitch (1994), and their students have used the ethnography of communication to examine culture, discourse, and communicative practices with the research goal of learning more about the identity, personhood, or membership of a social group. Some have grounded this research in a speech or communication community, whereas others have purposefully avoided the term. More recently, scholars in this tradition have sought to employ in-group markers for its boundaries or practices and to focus only on what the group itself finds meaningful.

Milburn (2004) reviewed the way speech community has been used within this discipline. She found that typically, scholars enter a setting or scene where group members interact and define the boundaries of the speech community under examination by label, place, or code. This process often results in having researchers, rather than the group itself, define the boundaries of the group under investigation. Another issue is that the study of communication encompasses more than just speech, including gesture and nonverbal dimensions, as well as joint action and meaning. Focusing only on a speech community may feel restrictive to those with this expanded view of communication.

Another extensive literature review was conducted by Patrick (2002) who asked if it is a historic coincidence that language and culture have intersected. To address this question, one must recognize culture (as Bloomfield did) as the broader category, and speech community as a group within a culture. While Patrick too grappled with the idea of speech community as a compound concept, he concluded that linguistic features should be more relevant than the social unit.

The research future of "speech community"

When considering the future of a speech community, one must recognize that over time, languages and communities change. While some research momentarily focuses on a preexisting speech community and gives the impression that it has stable qualities to discover, one must always recognize that research occurs at one point in time and is therefore only a snapshot of the speech community as enacted at that moment.

Is the term speech community still relevant, or have other terms become more useful and eclipsed it? For instance, when scholars use the term discourse community, they examine a regular set of communicative practices engaged in by participants. Some prefer the term *discourse* as it seemingly encompasses both writing and speech (although speech community has also been examined through writing). The implication that a discourse community overlaps with a speech community may be incidental, as members of a discourse community may not share geographic boundaries, nor be an historic social grouping. Recently, some ethnography of communication researchers have questioned the value of beginning with the speech community, and chosen instead to focus specifically on communicative practices. For example, some have suggested moving to Lave and Wenger's (1991) term, *communities of practice* to emphasize this point. Research examining language as one form of communicative action may not even bother to make claims about whether or not those actions lead to membership within a group.

For many, the original reason for defining any particular speech community was to compare and contrast ways of speaking between different groups. However, today many scholars recognize that some people may participate in more than one speech community, and membership may overlap. The boundaries of a speech community may become less important when the focus of research is more about how people interact to accomplish shared goals, rather than how people interact to form a group.

Perhaps the main challenge to the utility of the term speech communities is, at heart, the geographic question. While traditionally researchers have located a speech community within a discreet geographic area or region, there is an increasing interest in the dispersal of what was seen as formerly stable, homogeneous groups as well as interest in places where subgroups, who use a variety of different linguistic features, reside. At the same time, some researchers are theorizing more specific ways to demark very specific speech community boundaries, using more precise geographic methods and measurements. Other recent studies have focused on the formation and dissolution of speech communities that are no longer dependent upon those living in the same geographical region, but those who engage purposefully with others in virtual spaces, forming online speech communities. In fact, some claim that online communities can sustain an otherwise disappearing language or speech practices. Along similar lines, some research examines speakers' language loyalty to determine if a particular social grouping will maintain itself or hasten its demise.

In sum, when deciding if the term speech community is appropriate, the following questions may serve as a guide for its use:

- Is an interest in the social group prompting examination of the way a group communicates?
- Does the group of interest use language in a unique way?
- Are interactants using or developing norms or rules for interaction unique to the group?
- Do participants have to share a common language or way of speaking in order to use it appropriately? Can individuals act idiosyncratically and still be a participating

member of the speech community? How are overlapping memberships, or heterogeneous groupings expressed?
- Is the goal of the community in question to communicate or to accomplish joint action?

Noticeably absent from the literature is any commentary about what to designate regular and consistent groups of interactants who do *not* form a speech community. Positing one of these questions, or another that stems from the research traditions, can lead to many more productive years of speech community scholarship.

SEE ALSO: Code-Switching; Community of Practice; Ethnography of Communication; Sociocultural Linguistics; Speech Codes Theory

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Trudy Milburn is an associate scholar with the Center for Local Strategies Research, University of Washington. She is the coauthor of *Citizen Discourse on Contaminated Water, Superfund Cleanups, and Landscape Restoration: (Re)making Milltown, Montana* and the author of *Nonprofit Organizations: Creating Membership through Communication*. Her work has appeared in publications such as *Journal of Applied Communication Research, Communication Monographs*, and *Business Communication Quarterly*. She has been a tenured, associate professor on the faculties of California State University, Channel Islands and Baruch College/The City University of New York, and was chair of the Language and Social Interaction Division of NCA.