Ethnography of Communication

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Ethnography of Communication

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Ethnography of communication (EC) is a multidisciplinary research approach that employs ethnographic accounts of actual communication events and occasions, in order to understand distinct cultural and contextual dimensions of communication. EC supplies both rich theoretical foundations and detailed methodological procedures to the analysis and understanding of discoursal and other communication sign systems in everyday interactions and mediated rituals. Contrary to the seemingly general meaning that the term possesses (addressing all matters concerning ethnography and communication), EC is a distinctive approach in how it addresses the elements that comprise communication as practice, means, and media of communication, participants and participation structure, and communication environments and contexts. EC (sometimes abbreviated EoC) originated with the work of North American anthropologist, folklorist, and linguist Dell Hymes in the 1960s, and has since been productively employed in a number of scholarly fields and disciplines.

Hymes (1962) initially coined the term "ethnography of speaking," but noted that speech and speaking "are surrogates for all modes of communication," and that "a descriptive account should be generalized to comprise all" (p. 24). In subsequent publications a broader conceptualization was advanced, namely EC (Gumperz & Hymes, 1964, 1972). From its inception, EC aimed to study language and communication in *actual* occasions and interactions, the diversity that these events—and the elements that comprise them—evince, the social and cultural contexts where language is so used, and the dimensions and effects of the different types of uses. The value of EC and its rich impetus rest on the approach's interdisciplinary blend of theoretical knowledge and methodological rigorousness, which together offer a holistic view. The holistic view centrally builds on ethnographic sensitivities and sensibilities, which aim at macro-level conceptualization and theorizing, while offering a clear and detailed grid of what needs to be attended to when studying actual instances of communication (the SPEAKING heuristic—more on this later).

Historically, EC was initiated partly as a response to Chomskyan linguistics, with its stress on abstract (mentalist or cognitivist) and universalist conceptualizations of language, and partly as a reaction to rule-governed Saussurean structuralism. EC sought to replace neat and orderly theoretical contemplations with descriptions of actual and "messy" communication events and occasions. The assumptions underlying EC differ radically from previous linguistic approaches, as well as from earlier studies on

language in anthropology. In seeking to advance a humanistic, empirically grounded, rich and holistic research approach, Hymes and his associates and students propelled what Duranti (2003) calls the second historical paradigm in the development of a "language as culture" view within U.S. anthropology. The assumptions underlying EC are reflected in four dimensions.

First, scholars pursuing EC view language as an *important and integral part of social life and cultural activity*. Hymes (1962) stated that "there is no question but that speech habits are among the determinants of non-linguistic behavior, and conversely. The question is that of the modes and amounts of reciprocal influence" (p. 17). Moreover, EC holds that the tight reciprocal interrelations between language and sociocultural domains of life rest on the fact that language appears as an activity. Indeed, Hymes' initial contribution was published in an edited collection titled *Anthropology and Human Behavior*, pointing at the praxis-oriented view of language he held. The term "speaking" and later, in a more encompassing way, the term "communication," intently point at and designate a broad variety of human behavior. For Hymes (1962), behavior is not only learned and acquired through language, but also "expressed through language" (p. 13). At stake are actual linguistic and communicative activities and practices, or "*la parole*," rather than more static and abstract views of language, or "*la langue*" (where the focus is on the linguistic code rather than on how codes emerge in-and-through activity). "The ethnography of speaking," Hymes (1962) noted, "is concerned with the situations and uses, the patterns and functions, of speaking as an activity in its own right" (p. 101). Hymes further developed this view, when a few years later he addressed speaking through a specifically expressive framework, outlining the performative characteristics and effects of different communication genres in his well-known "breakthrough into performance" essay (Hymes, 1975).

Second, EC holds a universal view of language and communication in the sense that these are essential and pervasive human activities and features. Yet, and akin to the disciplines that shaped it (mainly anthropology, folklore, and rhetoric), the way these universals are arrived at is empirical and comparative. EC stresses firstly the *diversity and variety* in human communicative activities and contexts, and only then arrives at similarities and resemblances. The emphasis on heterogeneity emerges from an up-close study of different cultures, societies, and actual contexts and events, stressing variation in the practices as well as in the sign systems. While studies taking an EC approach typically focus on predominantly one cultural context, they do this "with an eye towards cross-cultural comparison" (Keating, 2001, p. 290).

Third, EC emerged and has since flourished as an inter- and multidisciplinary nexus of knowledge and methods. Hymes himself studied anthropology and folklore, to graduate in linguistics (from Indiana University in 1950). Scholars that influenced his thinking came from a range of fields, such as sociolinguistics, rhetoric, literary criticism, and ethnomethodology. From this perspective, EC illustrates the potentially rich blend of scientific and humanistic approaches, drawing eclectically on the humanities and the social sciences and creatively bridging disciplinary divides. Since the 1980s, EC has been successfully adapted to and integrated into communication studies, mostly through the works of Philipsen (1987) and his students. These works further expand the approach,

stressing the sign system, or the code, that is used for communication, and adding a rigorous emphasis on empirical findings (more on this later).

Fourth, as a result of the praxis-orientated view that EC promotes, ethnography is the preferred methodology for observing and depicting sets of naturally occurring communicative activities. In a moment that preceded, yet fueled, the "turn to ethnography" in the 1970s and 1980s, EC was an early bird that highlighted the prolific potential of ethnographic studies for a cluster of fields and approaches that explored the use of semiotic modalities and communicative practices in everyday life (including, but not limited to, language and social interaction and sociolinguistics). The reference to the word "ethnography" addresses a comprehensive methodology and not merely a method, attempting an overall appreciation of discourse and communication. The marriage between communication studies and ethnography proves productive due to four main ethnographic sensitivities: (i) Ethnography is a *praxiological methodology*, and if the use of sign systems and media is an observable (and recordable) human phenomenon, then directly observing and partaking in communicative events affords a rich and empirically grounded source of knowledge. (ii) Ethnography is a *situated engagement* which takes place at the site it studies. For this reason, ethnography is ideally suited for supplying a "thick description" not only of communicative practices, but also of the material and spatial settings—the media ecology—within which communication transpires. Viewed ethnographically, the notion of practices refers to patterned activities that are embodied, enmeshed in, and shaped by techno-material affordances of participants, communities, and institutions. (iii) Related, as a situated form of inquiry, ethnography is well geared towards exploring *naturally occurring* communicative events, or events that are not stimulated by those studying them. Unlike other methods that are frequently used in the social sciences (interviews, focus group, surveys), EC focuses on events and rituals that are part of the culture that is studied. (iv) In line with Hymes' contemporaries (notably Garfinkel), EC seeks to understand *participants' ways of understanding*. This is a reflexive approach to social life and communication, where reflexivity is seen as present in and shaping social interactions, and as manifest in ongoing behavior. In this way, description and conceptualization move away from an "etic" mode, which designates categories that are produced by the researcher, to an "emic" mode, which seeks categories that are produced and used by members.

These four dimensions reflect the ambitious scholarly aspirations that EC promotes, and the type of research that is conducted by scholars who pursue it. These dimensions highlight EC's stress on observable practices, on the situated nature of communication, and on the special cultural aspects of communicative events and rituals. They also account for the rich spectrum of social practices and cultural sites that have been studied during the last half-century. While studies in EC typically begin by patient exploration of participants' practices and experiences, observations and other data nourish conceptual richness and theoretical developments. Much of what EC scholars study sheds light on cultural forms of integration and ritualization of communication in everyday life in different (sub)cultures, societies, and organizations.

The SPEAKING heuristic and core concepts

One of the characteristic features of EC, which contributes to its scholarly appeal, is the combination of practical research recommendations and conceptual apparatuses. Hymes' well-known *SPEAKING acronym* illustrates the former. The SPEAKING acronym manifests the careful consideration that different elements of communication should receive by those who study them, highlighting the overall complexity of mundane and seemingly trivial interactions. It was initially designed for the analysis of culturally demarcated speech events, but can be and truly has been employed in relation to a wide spectrum of communication rituals.

Hymes (1974) offered the acronym SPEAKING as a memory aid that includes eight main components: S designates *S*etting or *S*cene, which refers dually to the relevant *physical aspects* of the environment (including time: durations, intervals, synchronicity), and also to psychological settings and cultural definitions pertaining to the event. P designates *P*articipants and *P*articipant identities, ranging from the social categories that are being constructed and used within the encounter such as age, sex, and social status, to relationships between participants. Participation is not viewed as a given, and the process by which degrees and qualities of participation are accomplished is examined (often with the help of Goffman's (1981) studies on footing and framing). E designates *E*nds, seeking the goals and outcomes of communicative events, and of individual participants and organizations. Ends suggest that social behavior is often purposeful, or at least it is understood as such in the eyes of those conducting it. A refers to *A*ct sequence and *A*ct topic, which concern the structure and unfolding of communication as well as of the topics and themes that are being communicated. K refers to *K*ey or tone, which are the ways or manners that the communication is framed. This point concerns the fact that the key or the tone, though immensely important in understanding the message, are often not explicitly coded and therefore not easily captured. I represents *I*nstrumentalities or the linguistic code, referring to language and dialect as well as to other modes of signification such as indexicality and iconicity (more on these later). Importantly, *I*nstrumentalities also address the communicative channel (such as face-to-face interaction and technologically mediated communication). N designates *N*orms and refers to rules of interaction and interpretation, directing attention to whether the communication at hand is pursued by participants in line with common rules and norms (formal and informal), and whether participants are aware that these exist or that they pertain to the events in which they participate. G refers to *G*enre, which concerns the literary-stylistic type of communicative events and actions. Following Bakhtin (whose writings were translated in the 1970s), Hymes (1972) observed that "all speech has formal characteristics of some sort as manifestation of genres" (p. 65). From a digitally tweeted "selfie," through a poetic recitation or the telling of a fable, to police interrogation, communication is necessarily genred and the question concerns the means and meanings of these genres and how they are performed. Furthermore, in actual social exchange genres often intersect intertextually and interdiscursively, amounting to intricate hybrid and multimodal genres of communication.

The SPEAKING acronym offers a heuristic grid that serves as means and not as ends. It is commonly taught in undergraduate and graduate classes, where it is a helpful tool in

organizing and focusing research projects (which, especially in ethnographic contexts, are an inherently "messy" endeavor). The dimensions that the acronym refers to can also be viewed as variables that can possess more than one value, and which are overlapping and at times even interchangeable. As a helpful tool to "think with" ("not a system to be imposed, but a series of questions to be asked," Hymes, 1962, p. 25), Hymes' SPEAKING acronym illustrates EC's rigorous and comprehensive program when addressing aspects of communicative events, practices, and sites, and the complexity of the (emergent) sign systems that are being used. EC emerges as a holistic approach that stresses activity and a processual appreciation of actual, situated, and naturally occurring communicative practices and texts.

A number of additional concepts comprise the theoretical core of EC, and complement the heuristic merit of the SPEAKING acronym. These include communication event, means of communication, speech or communication economy, and speech community. A *communication event* is a discernable occasion where communicative activity is centrally pursued. Communicative events can range from popular televised interviews and appearances in talk shows in North American culture (see Carbaugh's (1988) study of the American Donahue Show), to studies on young children's exchanges of secrets in the Israeli culture (Katriel, 1990). Studying these events sheds light on larger, common, and often unnoticed sociocultural rituals that involve constellations of domination and resistance within a given society at a particular sociohistorical time. These rituals also include a range of medial technologies, shedding light on the roles and meanings of changing forms of mediation and communication. Hymes (1962) adds that "One good ethnographic technique for getting at speech events … is through words which name them" (p. 24). He stresses in this way that, whether formally or colloquially, participants, communities, and organizations use common terms to designate and frame communication rituals (this approach was revised and elaborated by Carbaugh (1989)). Hence the study of communication events fosters a reflexive view, where how the event is framed constitutes part of its sociocultural and organizational meaning. The questions that arise then refer also to who accomplishes the framing of these events, or who possesses—and who does not—the authority to do so.

Two other concepts, *means of communication* and *communication economy*, are interrelated and codependent. The first addresses the resources that effective communication requires and the different communicative styles that are used, as well as the meanings of the means or media that participants employ. The second term refers to all communicative activity that is relevant to a structural analysis of a community or an organization, and where the value of these behaviors is determined. These two concepts are interrelated and codependent because together they account for communicative features and variations on an individual level (micro), while also drawing attention to larger sociocultural schemes within which individuals communicate (macro). In other words, what counts in different cultural, social, and organization contexts as effective communication, and where communicative repertoires are evaluated, concerns communication economy.

A speech economy consists of communicative activities, where communication is not viewed as a matter of mere delivery of content (the "transmission" view of language and communication). Rather, language and communication carry

symbolic value in and of themselves (a point which the French sociologist Bourdieu later highlighted in his famous work on language and symbolic power). The very act of communicating—speaking, texting, posting, tweeting, and so on—has an exchange value within communities' and institutions' sociocultural marketplace or communication economy. This system of exchange value is not static but dynamic, and can best be conceived as a set of ongoing relationships (rather than predetermined values), where communication is continuously negotiated and evaluated. In this way a communication economy supplies communicative coherence in social realms, and its study promotes a coherent view of social hierarchies, the (uneven) distribution of communicative means/resources, and what it takes for individuals to be able to participate in social life. Johnstone and Marcellino (2010) conclude that, "speakers acting in a speech economy accounts for the contextual, relational and socially-judged aspects of speech. By according speech economy equal status with means of speech, Hymes can frame utterances as being meaningless outside of a particular macro-social context and set of relationships, subject not just to decoding but also to aesthetic judgment from members of the speech economy" (p. 60).

In addition to the SPEAKING model, and to the notion of communicative event, the related concepts of means of communication and communication economy supply further ways to study how communication is evaluated and appreciated by its producers and users, over and above the referential meaning (content or message) that is being communicated. Finally, these concepts evoke the notion of *speech community*, which too is central to EC. The term designates a group of people who share cultural norms and resources of and for communication, which are oftentimes implicit. While the notion speech community focuses on shared sign systems, it also emphasizes interactions and practices where these sign systems are actually used. This is a structural–functional view of society, which is balanced and complemented by critical accounts that highlight diversity, heteroglossia, and the unevenness of communication economy at given communities and organizations.

Current directions for EC in media and communication studies

EC emerged and prospered during the past half-century as an interdisciplinary approach, which creatively brings together theories and methods from anthropology, folklore, linguistics, rhetoric, and other fields across the humanities and the social sciences. The freshness of the approach remains tied to scholars' ability to adapt to and integrate changes in contemporary communication landscapes, as well as in proximate fields of inquiry and emerging theoretical and methodological configurations. For the field of communication, EC's multidisciplinary nature plays an enriching role as a *hub* where knowledge and methods are exchanged with related fields and like-minded scholars. The focus that EC puts on process and on patient observations of actual practices and environments, its commitment to an emic view that marries broad cultural dimensions with specific occasions and actions, and the rich set of concepts it offers, all promise prolific future contributions. This is specifically true in relation to

rapid changes in contemporary new media. EC highlights the materiality and means of communication (affordances and values), which are studied holistically as part of an overall communication economy, and which suggest that EC is especially apt to deal with highly technologized and mediated communication rituals.

The remaining space is dedicated to current engagements and opportunities that EC faces, in enriching and contributing to media and communication studies. Three points are highlighted: (i) the study of semiotics in new media communication; (ii) EC and proximate emerging fields of research; and (iii) maintaining and stressing EC's critical orientation.

First, as more and more communication events are technified, and interactions are increasingly mediated, proliferating media technologies are reshaping everyday practices and habits, identities and relationships. New media and digital mediation technologies offer growing opportunities and occasions where large numbers of people are co-present in a given (virtual) space, intimacies and participation are performed across geographical distances (telepresences), and new sign systems emerge, which are typically multimodal: iconic and highly visual. Research taking a Hymesian approach has addressed new media since the late 1980s, attuning to interactional, coordinated and "real-time" mediated events. Yet with the wide spread of new media, EC, which has emerged as ethnography of speaking and then as an ethnography of communication, turns to incorporate technologies and symbolism associated with mediation seriously as an *ethnography of mediation*. In this "moment" or "turn" in the innovation and expansion of EC, it centrally addresses and conceptualizes the *emergence of new* sign systems (new media codes), *material and technological semiotics*, and *participatory structures*. The ethnographic emphasis remains on the settings, participants, and practices involved in the situated production of meanings, identities, and relationships in and through communication. Yet the rapidly shifting landscape of new media both requires and stimulates adequate concepts and research methods.

New media brings with it new sign systems. Katriel (2015) points out that sign systems should be creatively viewed by EC scholars as emergent, highly contextualized, and improvisational, rather than as an already-existent set of agreed-upon signifiers. The question currently before EC is not only how, when, and by whom sign systems and messages are produced and received, but that new sign systems are emerging and are being shaped in line with new media practices and affordances. "The rapidly changing techno-social settings of today call attention to the encoding of new patterns and norms of communication as a process-in-time, including its precoded moments of indeterminate meanings and potentials for action" (Katriel, 2015, p. 456).

Entextualization and entextualization rituals are useful concepts for designating the materialization of inscription contexts and practices of new sign systems in new-media environments. The exploration of new and multiple sign systems and encoding practices, accords well with the agenda of EC, as Hymes (1972, p. 63) specifically called for "accounts of the interdependence of channels in interaction and the relative hierarchy among them." An emphasis on the study of micro-entextualization events highlights not only the material practices involved in writing activities (defined broadly), but also the way language is communicatively structured so that "chunks" can be detached and put into circulation: from oral proverbs and the Grimm Brothers' folktales to

multimodal digital memes of babies and kittens. Studying entextualization suggests a preference for *re*mediation over mediation, or the *re*uses and *re*circulation of units of discourse. It also fosters a view of the multiplicity of communicative events and sites, and the channels through which they are connected, and directs research into intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Bartesaghi & Noy, 2015).

Emerging new sign systems are shifting from a predominantly symbolic mode of signification toward an iconic mode (emojis, smileys), where, as Peirce suggested, the signifier denotes the signified according to similarity rather than convention (1991). With the wide-ranging visual turn in communication studies and nearby disciplines, and the shift to screen-centered (tele-)communication, multimodality, and multimodal sign systems have become prevalent. The conceptualization of these sign systems in EC is augmented by recent advancements in multimodal theory. On a larger scale, the turn to multimodal communication signals not only a shift away from a symbolic or referential mode of signification, but also the end of single modality or single-channel communication. The turn to multimodality also complements an earlier focus on an *indexical mode of signification*, where signification builds on physical association between signifier and signified (following Silverstein's (1976) early work on indexes). EC's contribution in studying communication up-close and multimodal sign systems concerns communication economies and the interrelationship between different sign systems. In current communication environments, modal-switching and codeswitching (code-mixing) are prevalent, and intersecting modalities and hybrid sign systems bring different meanings into interaction. EC's praxis-oriented focus suggests that semiotics can never be reduced to, or contained in, the sign system alone. Meanings are communicated over and above signs, and different media, media choices (and media switches), and media ideologies, bear meanings that are not coded or are not yet coded (they are "pre-coded," Katriel, 2015). Holistic accounts of communication events address semiotics as accounted by the participants themselves, in relation to a sign system but also to entextualization practices and communicative possibilities more generally. As current work in linguistic anthropology teaches, focusing on the sign system at the expense of contexts and channels of communication risks decontextualizing the meaning it serves for those participating in the communication event.

Finally, multiplicity of channels and sign systems, and the continuous tension between private and public spheres and accesses to social media suggest new and intricate participatory structures. These call to mind Goffman's production format conceptualization (Goffman, 1981). Studies in EC, with its diverse "toolkit" and emphasis on ethnographic observation and participation, attend to emerging production and participation formats in nuanced ways, addressing new forms of collaborative authorships, and of audiencing and overhearing over the Web and mobile media.

Second, proximate emerging fields of research. During the last couple of decades, EC has inspired and interacted with a number of fields of inquiry, including (but not limited to) new literacy studies, linguistic ethnography, and microethnography. These fields promise interesting overlaps and productive intersections. New literacy studies, for instance, take a critical perspective on the study of literacy as situated performances, and stresses ethnographic approaches to writing (and reading) practices—both inside and outside formal learning institutions and contexts. Developed in the United

Kingdom, the new literacy studies approach offers a view of literacy events and practices that merges cultural and contextual dimensions, rejects dichotomies between oral and literate individuals and communities, and stresses the pluralities and multiplicities of literacies (over a single hegemonic notion of literacy). The question of multiple literacies extends the sites and events under examination beyond such artifacts as books and notebooks, and such environments as schools and classrooms. EC intersects with yet other fields (North American writing studies), as well as with new ethnographic approaches to new media and the study of entextualization and *re*mediation in relation to digital literacies. Like linguistic ethnography and microethnography, the field of new literacy studies illustrates the dynamic scholarly landscape surrounding and intersecting with EC, with its potential for further mutual collaboration and enrichment.

Third, maintaining EC's critical orientation. The emphasis that new literacy studies and other post- and neo-Hymesian revisions put on a critical orientation to language and communication is in part a response to the sometimes vague critical sensibilities of those pursuing EC. These developments invite EC scholars to revisit and refocus their critical orientation, as well as its adaptation to current projects including the study of new media, digitization, social networks, and Big Data ethnography. It is occasionally noted that EC is not a critical approach (Keating, 2001, esp. pp. 294–295), and admittedly, the critical agenda that EC exercises does not rely on "isms" (Marxism, Feminism). It is set, instead, in a committed humanistic agenda that doubts accepted views and norms, and hegemonic truths. Among the critical sensibilities that EC sustains is, centrally, a *counter-hegemonic* orientation that challenges established views of language and communication. For instance, some research asks how language and discoursal resources are socially and culturally mapped into functions, and why and how it is that one language variation is set to be a standard to be taught in schools while another is not. Also, with its insistence on detailed descriptions of naturally occurring interactions, EC seeks to complicate, rather than simplify (reducing complexity) social interaction and the social sphere more generally. Furthermore, EC helps to reveal how large-scale oppressive structures and organizations actually accomplish their work. The move from structural and functional approaches to an underlining critical orientation is sometimes designated by a *neo*-Hymesian view.

The technification and increasing mediatization of communication, emphatically within the current economic zeitgeist, characterized by neoliberal capitalism, heightened consumerism, and excessive privatization, requires a matching, rigorously critical agenda. As the notion of hegemony oscillates between the state (and its institutions) and global financial organizations, EC studies are turning to address uneven distribution of resources and accesses, and sites of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic power. In addition, in a historic review of the study of language-as-culture in the United States, Duranti (2003) notes that while "Hymes expected ethnographers of communication to concentrate on what was *not* being studied by ethnographers and grammarians" (p. 333, emphasis by the author), today EC scholars engage in sites that are *already* being studied by scholars in other fields. The critical study of nationalism and national identity, as pursued by commemoration agents and museums, is a case in hand (Noy, 2015). This wave of studies highlights large-scale enterprises through critical and detailed ethnographic explorations of discourse and communication at different levels.

SEE ALSO: Critical Discourse Analysis; Critical Ethnography; Discourse Analysis; Emic Approach to Qualitative Research; Ethnography/Ethnographic Methods; Ethnomethodology; Observational Methods; Qualitative Methodology; Textual Analysis

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