Ethnography of Cultural Communication

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Ethnography of communication (EC) encompasses an approach, methodology, and theoretical perspective focused on identifying and formulating cultural patterns of communication in situated contexts. In every interaction individuals use particular communicative resources in order to conduct their social lives, and these resources or means of communicating are distinctive to the groups using them, meaningful to the speakers, and patterned according to the cultural norms of the speech community which have developed over time. By focusing on everyday talk in a variety of contexts, ethnographers of communication work to understand and describe distinctive ways of speaking with an emphasis on interpreting the meanings of these ways of speaking from the speakers' perspective. Beyond focusing on distinctive cultural ways of communicating, ethnography of communication also aims to formulate general principles of cultural communication

In 1962 Dell Hymes, linguist and anthropologist, introduced a new unifying discipline he called the *ethnography of speaking.* Hymes pointed to linguistics as a discipline which had mainly focused on language as an abstract system, removed from its social contexts and cultural meanings. Concomitantly, anthropology tended to focus on cultural artifacts and systems that were related to communication (or accomplished through communication) but that ignored communication as a cultural activity unto itself. In 1964 Hymes changed the name of the discipline to the *ethnography of communication* in order to highlight that speaking is but one means that individuals use to communicate with one another. The focus of this new approach was the means or resources individuals use to create meaning in everyday social interactions. In other words, Hymes called for scholars to study the means of communicating and what those means—or resources—mean to those who use them. One may understand the term "means" or "resources" as pointing to all of the ways individuals communicate including those means that move beyond language and speaking, such as chanting, dancing, drumming, gestures, music, storytelling, whistling, writing, and computer-mediated, among others.

In 1972 John Gumperz and Dell Hymes published an edited volume of studies that would advance the area of ethnography of communication considerably. By 1986 Philipsen and Carbaugh had published a bibliography with over 250 ethnographies of communication, and since then, scholars and practitioners continue to conduct studies that examine how culture reveals itself in everyday interactions within international contexts and in various languages. While EC has its roots in linguistics and

anthropology, there are clear connections to conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and linguistic anthropology, to name only a few.

Assumptive foundation

Prior to the development of ethnography of communication, there was a fairly widespread and shared view that while language had a structure and was rule-governed, speaking, in contrast, was an idiosyncratic activity and not necessarily bound by rules or cultural norms. The discipline of EC made central the assumption that speaking or communicating, much like language, constitutes a system, is patterned, has a culturally recognizable order, and is rule-governed. Philipsen (1992) expanded on this by pointing out that when individuals communicate in social contexts, their choices are not random; for example, when to speak and when to remain silent, when to gesture and how, which language to use in which context—all of these choices fall within a *structured* cultural system that is meaningful to the speakers themselves. However, Philipsen also noted that while speaking is structured, this assumption does not mean that speaking is completely determined or absolutely predictable. Individuals play with the rules that govern communication all the time, so knowing the acceptable organization or structure for any communicative act only provides a backdrop for the cultural group member to challenge, violate, avoid, and reinforce the structure, rather than necessarily being bound to it.

Another widely held assumption prior to the ethnography of communication was that speaking and its functions did not vary across cultural groups. In contrast, EC recognizes speaking as a *distinctive* cultural activity whose meaning is shaped by the particular discursive systems utilized by speech communities in specific social scenes. For example, when speakers choose between the informal or formal pronoun in many languages, the choice connotes distinctive social meanings that are dependent on the particular speakers, their relationship, the context in which they are conversing, and the functions or goals of their communication in that moment. Winchatz (2007) has shown the choice between the informal *du* and the formal *Sie* second-person pronouns is often a confusing and difficult one for German speakers. Though the grammatical options of the informal versus formal are clear and available in many languages, the momentary choice to use one pronoun over another for many German speakers is tied to the distinctiveness of the individuals' relationship within a particular social scene and may result in the experience of tension, alienation, anger, or confusion for those involved.

If we accept that communication is both structured and distinctive, a third component to the assumptive foundation of ethnography of communication is that communication is also *socially consequential*. One example of socially consequential communication appears in Philipsen's (1992) report of his earlier study on a Chicago Southside neighborhood. When a Teamsterville man chooses to physically punish or talk to his child about the child's behavior, the subsequent communicative act will not only "do parenting" according to the cultural code of that neighborhood, but will simultaneously display the man's understandings of the appropriate relationships for a

parent and child in that cultural scene. Therefore, for every communicative moment that individuals co-create, there are implications for our social relationships. It is through communication that we show our intimacy, solidarity, and connectedness with others, as well as our separateness, alienation, and disaffiliation.

Units of analysis

There are a number of concepts and foci that have become key players in many ethnography of communication studies. Some of these were named early on by Hymes, the discipline's founder, while others developed over time as EC grew into a mature discipline. Hymes's conceptualization of the main units of analysis for EC scholars were the *speech community*, *speech situation*, *speech event*, *speech act*, and *ways of speaking*, among others.

The *speech community* is not defined by geographic boundaries; rather, its members must speak at least one common language, have a general frequency of contact, and share norms of communicative conduct and norms of interpretation of such conduct. This means that members of a speech community share a type of communicative competence and code that allow them to behave in culturally appropriate ways and interpret others' communication according to shared norms.

A *speech situation* (or communication situation) is the larger context or site in which events and acts can occur. Examples of communication situations are a wedding, a dinner party, a parent teacher association meeting, a therapy session, or a stand-up comedy show. A *speech event* (or communication event) is a set of activities or components of activities that are made up of a single speech act or multiple speech acts. Examples of speech events are a conversation, a debate, a call to order, or an introduction. A *speech act* (or communication act) is the smallest unit of analysis here and refers to verbal and nonverbal activities that comprise speech events. These may be at the level of a word or a nonverbal action, or the speech act may be made up of several utterances or a string of nonverbal behaviors. Examples of speech acts are compliments, jokes, gossip, greetings, and commands. The cultural norms of communication and interpretation within a speech community define the boundaries within which a speech act may be part of one speech event or another, and likewise, such norms define which speech events comprise which speech situations. One speech act, such as a greeting, may be part of various speech events, such as an introduction or a debate; in turn, a speech event such as an introduction may be part of various speech situations, such as a dinner party, wedding, or parent teacher association meeting.

Ways of speaking is a term used by Hymes to point to the patterned and culturally meaningful ways that speech community members communicate. In many instances, speech communities label or name their *ways of speaking*, which points to the significance of the patterned communication for a particular group. *Ways of speaking* have a natural connection then with another conceptual focus in the ethnography of communication called *metacommunicative terms* (also referred to as "terms for talk"). For example, ethnographers of communication have studied 'brownnosing' in organizations, 'joking' among the Western Apache, and *dugri* (a type of straight

talk) in Israeli Sabra culture. Another conceptual focus that intertwines with *ways of speaking* is the study of *terms of address*. *Terms of address* express social meanings; in other words, when a speaker utters a title (e.g., Sir, Madam, Mr, Mrs, Dr, Lieutenant) or a personal pronoun (e.g., 'you' in English or the choice between *tu* and *Usted* in Spanish), the speaker is expressing her or his understanding of self, of the other, and of the relationship between self and other. In order to understand the rich and culturally distinctive social meanings available to speech community members throughout the world, ethnographers of communication have studied terms of address in multiple languages, including Egyptian Arabic, French, German, Icelandic, Hindi, Spanish, and Yiddish, to name a few. To summarize, in order for an ethnographer of communication to identify and formulate a cultural way of speaking within a speech community, focusing on a particular communicative resource, such as metacommunicative terms or terms of address, is often a helpful inroad.

Taken in total, the above-mentioned conceptual framework—*speech situations, speech events, speech acts, ways of speaking, metacommunicative terms*, and *terms of address*, among others—all provide paths to revealing culture in everyday talk. In dealing with the abstract notion of culture, ethnography of communication does not define it as a group of people or a geographical boundary; rather, culture may be understood as a system comprised of elements such as symbols, meanings, premises, and rules. However, the ethnographer of communication is particularly interested in that subset of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules that pertains to communicative conduct within a speech community. Philipsen (1992) calls this subset of components a *speech code*; that is, a speech code may be understood as the full array of distinctive communicative resources, our understandings of those resources, the values we place on those resources, as well as the ways we should and should not use those resources in the negotiation of our social lives through interaction. The formulation and identification of a speech code is a complex undertaking, as speech codes in many ways subsume all of the above-mentioned concepts (speech acts, metacommunicative terms, ways of speaking, and so forth). Speech codes shape our communicative choices and guide our sense-making of others' communicative behavior as we engage in our daily social interactions within distinctive cultural settings.

Finally, if an ethnographer of communication wishes to discover and study the various units of analysis mentioned above, it becomes necessary to pinpoint interactional sites that may provide access. *Rituals*, *myths*, and *social dramas* have all played a significant role in many EC studies whose aim has been to uncover distinctive, patterned, and socially consequential communicative conduct within speech communities. *Rituals* may be understood as a set of repeated acts (both verbal and nonverbal) that follow a particular sequence and are completed in order to honor something the cultural group holds in reverence. *Myths* are larger stories that display a society's persuasive and interpretive resources; such stories, when studied, reveal what themes, tropes, and narrative plots are convincing and credible to a cultural group. *Social dramas* are sequences of communicative conduct in which a member of society violates a social rule and is challenged for it; the challenge may be met with various responses by the violator, and ultimately, the social drama ends with either ongoing tension (if the violator's

response is viewed as insufficient) or relief and reintegration of the violator back into the societal fold.

Methodology and theoretical perspective

Ethnography, and the various methods that fall under this label—such as participant-observation, fieldnotes, ethnographic interviewing, and archival work—are the arsenal used for conducting EC research. At its core, EC forefronts the speech community members' meanings and interpretations of communicative conduct rather than those of the researcher. It is an *emic* perspective—working from data gathered in a distinctive cultural setting, the researcher describes, interprets, and theorizes the particularities of the case with the goal of developing a grounded, local theory of communicative practices *in situ*. The ethnographer of communication does not predetermine what she or he will find in the field, but instead studies the communication of community members as it occurs in everyday scenes in order to discover what is culturally patterned, distinctive, and meaningful to the speakers themselves.

   As a complement to the emic approach EC prioritizes, and in order to help ethnographers of communication make sense of the complexities of human communicative behavior, Hymes (1972) proposed an *etic* framework to guide researchers' observations and questions while conducting fieldwork. The framework may act as a guide or focusing lens during data collection, as well as an interpretive guide during analysis of said data. The framework is widely referred to as the *SPEAKING mnemonic*, in which each letter stands for a component of the communicative scene and the behavior within that scene that is worthy of analysis. It is worth noting that for each letter, the speech community member's viewpoint or understanding of the component is sought. Some letters, such as "S," point the researcher to two units of analysis: *setting* and *scene*. The setting is the physical context and the scene refers to the participants' understandings of what is going on in that context (e.g., the communication events are viewed as somber, funny, formal, informal). "P" refers to the *participants* themselves—that is, who is doing the communicating and how the participants understand their own and others' identities and relationships. The letter "E" refers to *ends*, which encompasses the goals of the individuals during the communicative event as well as the outcomes expected by the community. The *act sequence* falls under "A," which subsumes the communication acts engaged in by the participants as well as the sequential ordering of those acts. Next comes the participants' understandings of the *key* (K) or tone of the communication. The *instrumentalities* (I) refer to both the channel (e.g., written, oral) and form (e.g., typed, slang) through which the participants communicate. "N" encompasses both the *norms of interaction*—or the shared rules for communication—and the *norms of interpretation*—or the participants' shared meanings or understandings of the communication. Finally, the genre (G) is the type of communicative event in which the participants engage. The *SPEAKING mnemonic* thus serves as a descriptive device, an analytic and interpretive framework, and when used by various researchers across common phenomena, also aids in comparative analysis of communicative conduct across various contexts, speech communities, and languages.

As previously mentioned, EC's theoretical perspective is twofold. On the one hand, ethnographers of communication work to understand, describe, and interpret the patterned communicative conduct of particular speech communities, so developing a grounded and local theory of communication practices is one aim. On the other hand, Hymes argued that understanding various local practices across many cultural groups—while a worthy pursuit—should not be the endpoint for EC as a discipline. Rather, EC should strive to compare and contrast the similarities and dissimilarities of particular communication practices across a variety of contexts and speech communities. This allows EC to develop metatheories of communication—that is, larger theories that encompass and further theorize the findings of various EC studies.

One such metatheory that allows for comparison and contrast is *Speech Codes Theory* (SCT) first developed by Philipsen (1992) and then further advanced in its most recent iteration by Philipsen, Coutu, and Covarrubias (2005). The theory is built off of extensive empirical data of human communication collected through fieldwork studies and uses as its core concept the *speech code*. As was previously mentioned, a speech code may be understood as a system of patterned, distinctive, and socially consequential resources in a speech community that specifically pertain to communicative conduct. Such resources include the verbal and nonverbal symbols that speakers use in their everyday interactions, speakers' interpretations and judgments of those resources, as well as speakers' understandings of how those resources should and should not be used in particular contexts.

Speech Codes Theory has six propositions; each proposition provides a way to explain situated and local descriptions of cultural communication from particular EC studies while simultaneously offering a general understanding of communicative conduct across cultural groups. *Proposition 1* states that wherever there is a particular culture—or system of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules—there will always exist a subset of that system pertaining to communicative conduct. *Proposition 2* posits that in every speech community at any given time there are multiple speech codes at work. *Proposition 3* states that a speech code not only addresses communicative conduct in a speech community but that a speech code also points to individuals' understandings of human nature, social relationships, and persuasive strategies within a speech community. *Proposition 4* points to the speech code as the lens through which individuals' interpret their own and others' communicative practices. *Proposition 5* clarifies that if one is looking for the symbols, meanings, premises, and rules that pertain to communicative conduct in a speech community, one need only watch and listen to the communicative practices of individuals in that speech community; specifically, EC researchers should pay attention to units of analysis such as metacommunicative terms, communication in particularly significant moments for the speech community, contextual patterns of communication, and particular frames of communication such as rituals, myths, and social dramas. Finally, *Proposition 6* deals with how speech codes influence the communicative practices of speech community members. If a shared speech code is the foundation upon which speech community members will make sense of their own and others' communication (*Proposition 4*), then the shared speech code will also be used to shape the conduct of members in the speech community

and play a role in predicting how individuals' will respond to others' conduct in that community.

In a similar vein, *Cultural Discourse Analysis* (CuDA) is a framework that bridges theory and methodology within EC and has been used by researchers to investigate how culture influences communication as well as how interactions reveal cultural elements. Building off of his earlier work on cultural discourse theory, Carbaugh (2007) introduced CuDA as a way of investigating cultural discourses. A *cultural discourse* may be understood as a two-way street between culture and interaction—that is, culture is not only deeply embedded in systems of discourse (verbal and nonverbal), but culture is also an outcome of such discourse systems. CuDA subsumes five basic modes of inquiry: *theoretical*, *descriptive*, *interpretive*, *comparative*, and *critical*. The first three modes—theoretical, descriptive, and interpretive—are all crucial for any cultural discourse analysis, while the last two modes—comparative and critical—may be part of a cultural discourse analysis but are not essential. The modes are not necessarily linear; for example, a researcher may move back and forth between modes or start from one (e.g., the theoretical mode) and then circle back to that mode at the end of a study. Like ethnography of communication, CuDA emphasizes understanding cultural communication practices from the viewpoint of the speakers themselves. Accordingly, the interpretive mode is integral to investigating the range of meanings participants assign to the discursive practices in which they participate. In order to uncover the significance of discourse practices to speakers, CuDA expands the interpretive mode to include five *hubs* or *radiants of meaning* that help the ethnographer of communication to interpret the semantic meanings participants assign to their practices while allowing for creativity on the researcher's part to articulate these meanings through a different lens. The hubs or radiants include (a) meanings about personhood and identity (*being*), (b) meanings about relationships (*relating*), (c) meanings about action and practice (*acting*), (d) meanings about emotion and affect (*feeling*), and (e) meanings about place and environment (*dwelling*).

While Speech Codes Theory and Cultural Discourse Analysis go hand in hand in that the former provides solid theoretical grounding for any study that examines cultural patterns of communication and the latter provides a framework for designing those very studies, one important difference is worth noting. Like ethnography of communication, Speech Codes Theory and Cultural Discourse Analysis share a commitment to understanding the meanings of social interactions according to the participants themselves (as opposed to meanings that are assigned by the researcher). One difference between SCT and CuDA appears to lie in how power and privilege within social interactions are accounted for and addressed. One criticism that has been levied against SCT is that it does not account for demonstrations of power in discourse. The authors have argued, however, that speech codes researchers listen for the ways the speakers themselves understand and value the communication they experience. Therefore, if speakers themselves assign power as a dominant meaning or motive in any given interaction, the speech codes researcher will then focus on power rather than having an a priori commitment to looking for power in discourse. In CuDA, however, one of the main modes of inquiry is the critical mode, which allows the researcher to explicitly ask if a given discourse is privileging some speakers more than others, and beyond that, to provide a

critical appraisal of said discourse. SCT may highlight speech community members' critique of their own and others' discourse, while CuDA allows for a foregrounding of the researchers' reading of power and privilege in the community's discourse based on the researchers' own commitments. Further, there is no call to make such critique explicit in speech codes research as is the case in research conducted from a CuDA perspective.

Recent directions

Ethnography of Communication, as an approach, methodology, and theoretical perspective continues to broaden its scope. Most recently, EC has been used to better understand how cultural patterns of discourse reveal themselves through the rapidly changing technological *instrumentalities* we use to conduct our social lives. Some EC researchers are asking how shared codes of symbols and meanings may become destabilized through the use of technology and are calling for EC as a discipline to focus more on encoding processes. Further, EC application is a burgeoning area as developers and designers come to realize that an EC approach to understanding cultural patterns of interaction is a valuable tool for developing solutions and strategies to deal with human–machine interactions as well. As our interactions continue to transform through the ever-growing use of technology, EC will play an important role in understanding how shared cultural codes continue to develop, change, and allow us to connect to one another socially.

SEE ALSO: Conversational Norms Across Cultures; Cultural Communication, Overview; Cultural Communication Norms; Cultural Discourse Analysis; Culture in Conversation; Identity, Cultural; Speech Codes Theory; Worldview in Intercultural Communication

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