Linguistics and Ethnography of Communication*

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Abstract

Language is part of the culture of a people and the chief means by which the members of a language community communicate. Ethnography of communication is the study of the place of language in culture and society. This discipline is often considered as a branch of sociolinguistics and is closely related to ethnomethodology. Ethnographic description refers to knowledge available to members of speech community which is used, more or less consciously, to categorize persons, places and activities. Formal analyses in the ethnography of communication focus on supra-sentential elements: speech situations, the forms of speech events, the interrelations of speaker, addressee, audience, topic, channel and setting, and the ways in which the speakers draw upon the resources of their language to perform certain functions. This functional study is conceived as complementary with the study of linguistic structure. Functional analyses focus on larger social and cultural settings. In language teaching the concept of ethnography of communication has provided impetus to Communicative Language Teaching, especially through the notion of communicative competence.

  Key words: *Communication, communicative act, communicative competence, competence, ethnography, ethnography of communication, ethno methodology*

…if our concern is social relevance and social realism, we must recognize that there is more to the relationship between sound and meaning than is dreamt of in normal linguistic theory.

(Hymes 1975:3)

Ethnography of communication, introduced in the 1950s and early l960s by Gumperz (1972:205) is primarily concerned with the analysis of language use in its cultural setting. In 1970s various linguists have proposed different categorizations of the functions of language, e.g., Halliday (1973) distinguishes the following functions: instrumental (satisfying some material need); regulatory (regulating the behavior of people); interactional (maintaining social relationships); personal (expressing personality); heuristic (investigating the environment); imaginative (playing and creating); and representational (expressing propositions). As a branch of sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication aims at describing the forms and functions of verbal and non-verbal communicative behavior in particular cultural or social settings. Thus, in contrast to the linguistic theories of structuralism and transformational grammar, ethnography of communication is based on the premise that the meaning of an utterance can be understood only in relation to the 'speech event' or 'communicative event' in which it is embedded. Formal descriptions in the ethnography of communication focus on linguistic units above the sentence and the character of such communicative events, i.e., speech situations (e.g. ceremonies), speech events (e.g. sermons, trials or telephone calls) and speech events (e.g. greetings, compliments) is culturally determined. So, when you learn to use a language, you learn how to use it in order to do certain things that people do with that language. The term *communicative competence* is sometimes used to describe this kind of ability. In such competence, conversational inferences play a key role: participants link the content of an utterance and verbal, vocal and non-vocal cues with background knowledge in

order to come to an understanding about the specific interchange. Gumperz (1972: 205) explains the communicative competence as follows:

> *Whereas <u>linguistic competence</u> covers the speaker's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, <u>communicative competence</u> describes his ability to select, from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behavior in specific encounters.*

Definitely, it is not that linguistics does not have a crucial role. As Dell Hymes (1975:4) has pointed out, 'analyzed linguistic materials are indispensable, and the logic of linguistic methodology is an influence in the ethnographic perspective. It is rather that it is not linguistics, but ethnography, not language, but communication, which must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be assessed.' So, more is involved in achieving communicative competence than learning how to construct sentences. The special domain of linguistics according to Chomsky's (1972:111) theory is defined at a level far removed from 'actual speech'. While extra-linguistic facts about speaker and situation undoubtedly influence how speech is encoded and decoded, they are considered as the concern of social sciences from which pure linguistics is detached. The assumption of a homogeneous speech community, as discussed by Chomsky (1972:112-113), is actually unrealizable in the real world. Where the linguist considers differences within speech community as 'free variation', the sociolinguist considers some of them as systematically related to the social identities of the interlocutors, or the socio-cultural setting in which communication takes place. Like Chomsky's reference to the ideal speaker and listener, the ethnography of communication too rests on a theory- a theory of speech as a system of cultural behavior and of

linguistics as a social science. Wherever language is part of a whole process of interaction, its meanings are inseparable from its context, and it tells us far more than is carried on the surface of words. Language may be patterned in ways which show or define who the speakers are, what their relationship is and how they perceive the universe of discourse. A socially realistic linguistics tries to account these patterns. It is not concerned with idealized speakers, but with 'persons in the real social world'. Thus, in order to be communicatively competent, the speaker should know:

1) what is formally possible in a language, i.e., whether an instance conforms to the rules of grammar and pronunciation.

2) What is feasible in the language concerned? This is a psychological concept, concerned with limitations to what can be processed by the mind.

3) What is appropriate according to the socio-cultural setting? This concerns the relationship of language to social context and socio-cultural conventions.

4) What is technically known as attestedness and the collocations?

5) How to interpret paralanguage, understand pragmatic intention and distinguish different genres.

So language should be considered as a dynamic, social and interactive phenomenon - whether between speaker and listener, or writer and reader. It is plausibly argued that meaning is conveyed not by single sentences but by more complex exchanges, in which the participants' beliefs and expectations, the knowledge they share about each other and about the world, and the social situation in which they interact play a crucial part. So, whenever people speak, they organize their speech in ways over and above those governed by rules of grammar. Choices as to which language to use in a particular social situation, how to address an interlocutor, whether to delete or add sounds to words, whether to speak or remain silent, are not in free variation; but are patterned according to rules which are part of the social knowledge of a particular community. From this perspective,

speaking is a complex social as well as a linguistic act. To explain speaking activities – why they occur as they do and what they mean to those who participate in them – requires deliberate reference to their social contexts. Actually, in learning a language, children acquire knowledge of a set of ways in which sentences are used. From a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with socio-cultural features, they develop a general theory of the speaking appropriate in their community, which they employ, like other forms of tacit cultural knowledge, in conducting and interpreting social life. Of course ethnography of communication can not provide rules specifying exactly what message to select in a given situation. In fact people interact linguistically in such a wide range of social situations, on such a variety of topics, and with such an unpredictable set of participants, it has proved very difficult to determine the extent to which conversational behavior is systematic, and to generalize about it. Thus, speaking is not absolutely determined. Its rules are violated, and new rules and meanings are created. Any speech community is an organization of diversity. When, for example, one interlocutor addresses another with a specific pronoun, this can involve the selection from among forms which are grammatically and semantically equivalent but whose use has social meaning. If messages were perfectly predictable from knowledge of the culture, there would be little point in saying anything. But whenever a person selects a message, he does so from a set of appropriate alternatives. Thus, in learning to speak we are also learning to ' talk ', in the sense of communicating in the ways deemed appropriate by the community in which we are doing that learning.

Ethnography of a communicative event is an overall description of all the relevant factors in understanding how that particular communicative event achieves its objectives. Here, the first task is to define the speech community under investigation, gain some knowledge about its social organization and stratification, and formulate hypotheses about how these sociocultural phenomena relate

to patterns of communication. The following types of data should be specified in any ethnographic research:

1) Background information including historical knowledge of the community, important historical and sociocultural landmarks, population distribution, religious affiliation, customs, social values, beliefs, cultural schemata, paralanguage elements, etc.

2) Sociocultural organization, including identities of leaders, sources of power and influence, ethnic and class relations, etc.

3) Legal information such as what constitutes 'slander', what 'obscenity' and what is the nature of "freedom of speech' or how and when it is restricted.

4) Beliefs about language use including the nature of taboos and euphemisms, who and what is entitled to speak and who or what may be communicated with (e.g. god, animals, the dead, etc.).

Hymes (1975:62) uses the word SPEAKING as an acronym for the relevant factors in communicative event.

'S' stands for the Setting and Scene of speech, i.e., the real circumstances in which speech takes place. It may refer to the psychological setting or the cultural definition of the social situation. The important aspects of setting are the time and place in which people interact and their influence on the kind of communication that may occur – or whether communication is permitted at all. In institutionalized settings, such as a church or a court of law, the effect on language use is clear enough. But in many everyday social situations, and especially in foreign cultures, the relationship between the setting and language can be very difficult to discover. In different times and places the quality and quantity of the language we use will be subject to social evaluation and sanction. The extent to which people recognize, submit to, or defy these sanctions is an important factor in any study of contextual identity.

'P' stands for Participants, i.e., various combinations of speaker-listener, addressor-addressee or sender-receiver. Normally, a single person acts as sender, or addressor; but we have to allow to unison

speech, as in the case of liturgical responses in religious institutions or other rituals, group teaching (where the whole class may respond together), and popular acclamations (such as during a political address, or in sports arena). The linguistic characteristics of such speech (especially the suprasegmentals) will obviously be very different from those found when a person speaks alone.

'E' stands for Ends, i.e., the conventionally recognized and expected outcomes of an exchange as well as to the personal goals that participants seek to accomplish on particular occasion

'A' stands for Act sequence, i.e., the actual form and content of what is said: the precise words used, how they are used, and the relationship of what is said to the actual topic at hand. Linguists are specifically interested in this aspect of speaking which is discussed in discourse analysis and in pragmatics.

'K' stands for Key, i.e., the tone, manner or spirit in which a particular message is encoded: light-hearted, serious, precise, pedantic, mocking, sarcastic, pompous, and so on.

'I' stands for Instrumentalities, i.e., the choice of channel, e.g., oral, written, and the actual forms of speech used, such as language, dialect, code, or register that is chosen. Here, it should be emphasized that the various activities of the written language also display the influence of context – often in a highly distinctive manner, because of the visual contrasts available in the written medium, especially in print.

'N' stands for Norms of interaction and interpretation, i.e., the specific behaviors and properties that attach to speaking and also how these may be viewed by someone who does not share them, e.g., loudness, silence, gaze return and so on.

'G' stands for Genre, the clearly demarcated types of utterance, e.g., poems, proverbs, prayers, sermons, lectures and editorials. Evidently, when speaking goes wrong, as sometimes really does, that failure is often explainable in terms of some neglect of one or more of the above mentioned factors.

Types of Data for Ethnographic Research on Communication

Any ethnographic description of communication will need to provide data from the following interrelated domains:

A) The linguistic repertoire available to a speaker – how many different styles, registers and codes he can choose from.

B) Suprasentential structuring, i.e., how many differently structured linguistic events are recognized, i.e. ceremonies, rituals, trials, law courts, etc.

C) The rules of interpretation by which a given set of linguistic items comes to have a special communicative value.

D) The rules and norms which govern different types of interaction.

Definitely, from ethnographic point of view, there is no single best method of collecting information on the patterns of language use within a speech community. The most important aspects in ethnographic research should include: *A)* Introspection *B)* Participant-Observation *C)* Interviewing *D)* Ethnosemantics (Ethnoscience) *E)* Ethnomethodology and interaction analysis and *F)* Philology

Introspection is a means to collect data about one's own speech community, but it is an important skill to develop for that purpose. Here, ethnographers who are bicultural need to differentiate between believes, values and behaviors of their enculturation (belonging to their first culture learning) and acculturation (belonging to their second culture learning or adaptation). Introspection collects data about one's own speech community where answers to questions about the target community may be found. Moreover, this exercise in itself will provide valuable information and insights on the group and on individuals' behavior from the ethnography of communication point of view.

Participant-Observation involves researcher's immersing in the community for a year or more and freeing himself from the filter of his own cultural experience. Definitely, this requires knowledge about cultural differences, and sensitivity and objectively perceiving others.

Interviewing may provide a wide range of socio-linguistic information and results in information on kinship schedules, important communicative events and descriptions of encounters among members of the community in different contexts. The interviewer should choose reliable informants rather than those who are marginal to the community. He should be specifically sensitive to signs of acceptance, discomfort, resentment or sarcasm and be able to form culturally appropriate questions. Such interviews should also have precise data transcription, arrangement and analysis. The reliability of information can best be confirmed by asking similar questions from several people and comparing their answers.

Ethnosemantics is essentially concerned with specifying how experience is categorized by eliciting terms in informants' language at different levels of abstraction and analyzing their semantic organization, usually in the form of a taxonomy or componential analysis.

Ethnomethodology is concerned with discovering the underlying process which the interlocutors utilize to encode and decode communicative experiences. Sociolinguists believe that social knowledge is revealed in the process of interaction itself, and the format required for description of communication is dynamic rather than static.

In addition to the referential meaning of the texts, a variety of written materials may provide valuable information on patterns of use in the language, and on the culture of the people who read and write it. These written sources include theses and dissertations, governmental publications, diaries, and correspondence, archival sources, manuscripts, books and etc. Newspapers and periodicals, law books, court records, literature, idealized patterns of language and attitudes and values about language may also provide valuable sources of information about the socio-cultural setting and organization of the community.

Studying the ways of speaking in different speech communities reveal that speakers have in their linguistic repertoire a wide range of possible alternatives and are capable of exploiting the linguistic resources for all the varied ends of linguistic activity and negotiating meaning. Thus, from the standpoint of ethnography of communication, speakers display a wide range of speaking competences, a range which the term 'communicative' was proposed to encompass. So, the ethnography of communication highlights the various dimensions of cross-cultural variations in speech behavior. Moreover, from the viewpoint of adequacy, socially constituted linguistics has as a goal a kind of explanatory adequacy complementary to that proposed by Chomsky (2000:7-8). Chomsky's type of explanatory adequacy leads away from speech, and from languages, to relationships possibly universal to all languages of the world, and possibly inherent in human nature. The complementary type of explanatory adequacy leads from what is common to all languages towards what particular communities and persons have made use of their means of speech.

Conclusion

Ethnography of communication studies language in relation to the social and cultural variables which influence communication. It is not concerned simply with language structure, but language use, with rules of speaking, the ways in which speakers associate particular language codes, topics, modes of speaking, message forms and registers with particular socio-cultural settings. Linguists who study this area take into account all those extra-linguistic variables (e.g. context, code, tenor, etc.) which influence speech events, and seek to construct principles which govern human interaction. We discussed 'communicative competence' as a deliberate contrast to Chomsky's linguistic competence and pointed out that a person who has only linguistic competence would be unable to communicate. He can

produce grammatical sentences but presumably unconnected to the situation in which they occur.

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