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Ethnographic Approaches in Sociolinguistics

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One broad approach to researching the rules, cultural norms, and values that are intertwined with language use is ethnography. Ethnographic research is generally carried out through participant observation. Ethnographies are based on first hand observations of behavior in a group of people in their natural setting. Investigators report on what they see and hear as they observe what is going on around them. As Duranti (1997, 85) says, 'an ethnography is the written description of the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretive practices characteristic of a particular group of people.' Ethnographers ask themselves what is happening and they try to provide accounts which show how the behavior that is being observed makes sense within the community that is being observed. As Johnstone (2004, 76) says, ethnography 'presupposes . . . that the best explanations of human behavior are particular and culturally relative' rather than general and universal. Such studies are also qualitative rather than quantitative. In ethnographies of speaking the focus is on the language the participants are using and the cultural practices such language reflects.

Canagarajah (2006, 155) observes that: Ethnographers expect to live for an extensive period of time in the community they are studying in order to capture first-hand its language patterns and attitudes. As much as possible, they try not to alter the "natural" flow of life and social relationships of the community but understand how language works in everyday life.' They are participant-observers and must deal with the basic conundrum of participant observation, which Trusting and Maybin (2007, 578–9) explain as follows: 'Ethnographic work normally requires the researcher to be actively involved in the social action under study, suggesting that this generates insights which cannot be achieved in any other way. But the involvement of the researcher in social action inevitably changes the language practices under study.' This issue may also become more and more important as differences increase between the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the observer and the observed. It is certainly one that must be confronted by both those who publish ethnographies and those who read them.

Three illustrative book-length ethnographic studies are those of Sherzer (1983), Hill and Hill (1986), and Mendoza-Denton (2008). Sherzer describes how the Kuna of Panama use language: their public language of the gathering house, and their use of language in curing and music, in rites and festivities, and in everyday conversation. He points out that the Kuna wait very patiently to take their turns in speaking so that interruptions and overlaps in conversation are rare events.

Mendoza-Denton (2008) offers an account of Latina gangs in a California high school. She calls the school, which is located in the San Francisco Bay area, Sor Juana High School. She describes the students as a mixture of well-to-do Euro Americans, African Americans, Pacific Islanders, Asians, Asian-Americans, and Latinas/Latinos. She was particularly interested in this last group, especially the girls. She focused her research on the Norteñas and the Sureñas, two rival Latina gangs. She studied these groups in depth, having become over a period of time the confidant of members of both groups. She found a strong ideological divide between the groups. The Norteñas were 'northern'-oriented, preferred to speak English, wore red accessories and red lipstick, 'feathered' their hair, favored Motown Oldie music and the numbers XIV, 14, and 4, and, though Hispanic, were mainly US-born. In contrast, the Sureñas were 'southern' (i.e., more Mexican)-oriented, preferred to speak Spanish, wore blue accessories and brown lipstick, ponytailed their hair, favored Mexican bands, pop music, and the numbers XIII, 13, and 3, and were mainly recent immigrants. Mendoza-Denton shows how the members of each group express and reinforce their identities through their various practices and some of the linguistic consequences of such behavior. For example, she found that the preferred use of English or Spanish sometimes concealed a very good knowledge of the dispreferred other language, and that certain linguistic features of Spanish varied according to strength of commitment to the gangs.

It is also possible to do smaller scale studies using participant observation, focusing on very specific types of interactions in a group and particular linguistic features. For example, a seminal work by Frake (1964) focuses on how to ask for a drink; while this study makes uses of the author's extensive knowledge of the culture, it is illustrative of how a narrowly focused question about linguistic behavior can lead to an insightful analysis of cultural norms.

A third study which shows this specific focus is Basso (1970), who discusses the meanings of silence in Western Apache. Students wishing to do ethnographic research should note that although a deep understanding of the cultures is necessary for the interpretation of the data in all cases, focusing on very specific elements of communication helps to constrain the scope of these projects.

Communicative Competence

The term communicative competence is sometimes used to describe the knowledge of how to use language in culturally appropriate ways. This term was suggested by Hymes (1972) as a counter-concept to Chomsky's linguistic competence, which

focused on an ideal hearer-speakers' knowledge of grammaticality of sentences in their native language. Hymes maintained that knowledge of a language involved much more than that. Gumperz (1972, 205) explains the term as follows: 'Whereas linguistic competence covers the speaker's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, communicative competence 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.' Working with an ethnographic or functional approach, we may attempt to specify just what it means to be a competent speaker of a particular language. It is one thing

to learn the language of the Subanun, but quite another to learn how to ask for a drink in Subanun

Hymes (1972, 279) has argued that, in learning a language, children not only must learn how to construct sentences in that language but also must 'acquire knowledge of a set of ways in which sentences are used. From a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with sociocultural features.

In learning to speak we are also learning to communicate in ways appropriate to the group in which we are doing that learning; this is sometimes called language socialization. These ways differ from group to group; consequently, as we move from one group to another or from one language to another, we must learn the new ways if we are to fit into that new group or to use that new language properly. Communicative competence is therefore a key component of social competence. A famous study which focuses on communicative competence is found in Frake (1964); it outlines kinds of speech used in drinking encounters among the Subanun of the Philippines. Such encounters are very important for gaining prestige and for resolving disputes. Frake describes how talk, what he calls 'drinking talk,' proceeds in such encounters, from the initial invitation to partake of drink, to the selection of the proper topics for discussion and problems for resolution as drinking proceeds competitively, and finally to the displays of verbal art that accompany heavy, 'successful' drinking. Each of these stages has its own characteristics. Those who are the most accomplished at drinking talk become the de facto leaders among the Subanun because successful talk during drinking may be used to claim or assert social leadership. Success gives one a certain right to manipulate others, because it is during such talk that important disputes are settled, for example, disputes which in other societies would have to be settled in the courts. Thus, it is clearly not enough

to merely be adept at the grammar of the language; you also have to understand the social appropriateness of different constructions.

Speaking

Hymes (1974) has proposed an ethnographic framework which takes into account the various factors that are involved in speaking. An ethnography of a communicative event is a description of all the factors that are relevant in understanding how that particular communicative event achieves its objectives. For convenience, Hymes uses the word SPEAKING as an acronym for the various factors he deems to be relevant. We will now consider these factors one by one (see also the link in our companion website to a short video explaining this acronym). The setting and scene (S) of speech are important. Setting refers to the time and place, that is, the concrete physical circumstances in which speech takes place. Scene refers to the abstract psychological setting, or the cultural definition of the occasion. The Queen of England's Christmas message has its own unique setting and scene, as has the President of the United States' annual State of the Union Address. A particular bit of speech may actually serve to define a scene, whereas another bit of speech may be deemed to be quite inappropriate in certain circumstances. Within a particular setting, of course, participants are free to change scenes, as they change the level of formality (e.g., go from serious to joyful) or as they change the kind of activity in which they are involved (e.g., begin to drink or to recite poetry). The participants (P) include various combinations of speaker–listener, addressor addressee, or sender–receiver. They generally fill certain socially specified roles. A two-person conversation involves a speaker and hearer whose roles change; a 'dressing down' involves a speaker and hearer with no role change; a political speech involves an addressor and addressees (the audience); and a telephone message involves a sender and a receiver. A prayer obviously makes a deity a participant. In a classroom, a teacher's question and a student's response involve not just those two as speaker and listener but also the rest of the class as audience, since they too are expected to benefit from the exchange. Ends (E) refers to the conventionally recognized and expected outcomes of an exchange as well as to the personal goals that participants seek to accomplish on particular occasions. A trial in a courtroom has a recognizable social end in view, but the various participants, that is, the judge, jury, prosecution, defense, accused, and witnesses, have different personal goals. Likewise, a marriage ceremony serves a certain social end, but each of the various participants may have his or her own unique goals in getting married or in seeing a particular couple married. Act sequence (A) refers to 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. This is one aspect of speaking in which linguists have long shown an interest, particularly those who study discourse and conversation.

Key (K), the fifth term, refers to the tone, manner, or spirit in which a particular message is conveyed: light-hearted, serious, precise, pedantic, mocking, sarcastic, pompous, and so on. The key may also be marked non-verbally by certain kinds of behavior, gesture, posture, or even deportment.

Instrumentalities (I) refers to the choice of channel, for example, oral, written, signed, or telegraphic, and to the actual forms of speech employed, such as the language, dialect, code, or register that is chosen. Formal, written, legal language is one instrumentality; spoken Newfoundland English is another, as is American Sign Language; code-switching between English and Italian in Toronto is a third; and the use of Pig Latin is still another.

Norms of interaction and interpretation (N) refers to the specific behaviors and properties that attach to speaking and also to how these may be viewed by someone who does not share them (e.g., loudness, silence, gaze return, and so on). For example, there are certain norms of interaction with regard to church services and conversing with strangers. However, these norms vary from social group to social group, so the kind of behavior expected in congregations that practice 'talking in tongues' or the group encouragement of a preacher in others would be deemed abnormal and unacceptable in a 'high' Anglican setting, where the congregation is expected to sit quietly unless it is their time to participate in group prayer or singing.

Genre (G), the final term, refers to clearly demarcated types of utterance; such things as poems, proverbs, riddles, sermons, prayers, lectures, and editorials. These are all marked in specific ways in contrast to casual speech.

What Hymes offers us in his SPEAKING formula is a very necessary reminder that talk is a complex activity, and that any particular bit of talk is actually a piece of 'skilled work.' It is skilled in the sense that, if it is to be successful, the speaker must reveal a sensitivity to and awareness of each of the eight factors outlined above.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology is that branch of sociology which is concerned with talk.

Ethnomethodologists are interested in the processes and techniques that people use to interpret the world around them and to interact with that world. They are interested in trying to discover the categories and systems that people use in making sense of the world. Therefore, they do not conduct large-scale surveys of populations, they focus on the phenomena of everyday existence, actually on various bits and pieces of it, in an attempt to show how those who must deal with such bits and pieces go about doing so. Their methods are entirely inductive.

Ethnomethodologists are interested in such matters as how people interact, solve common problems, maintain social contacts, perform routine activities, and show that they know what is going on around them and communicate that knowledge to others.

Ethnomethodologists say that social order does not somehow exist independently of individuals. People must constantly create that order as they use language to give sense to their own behavior and to respond to the behavior of others. The meaning of what one says or does depends entirely on the context of that saying or doing, and the parties understand what has been said or done because they know things about the circumstances of that saying or doing, about each other, about previous similar occurrences and relationships, and about the various possibilities that might follow. There is also the issue of indexicality: people are also aware that certain linguistic items (even whole languages) are associated with certain social characteristics so that A – an accent, word, phrase, tone of voice, dialect, and so on – means, or can be taken to mean, B – smartness, foreignness, masculinity, impolite ness, superiority, and so on. In this sense, no utterance is ever ‘neutral’: it always indexes some characteristic of the speaker.

Background knowledge as part of communication

We can use a simple linguistic example to show that we cannot hope to understand others if we do not share certain background assumptions with those others. The following example of a two-sentence sequence to illustrate this point: ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up. We understand that mommy in the second sentence refers to the mother of baby in the first, but there is nothing in the structure of the sentences themselves to tell us this. All we have is a connection between baby and mommy achieved through mention in successive sentences. Sacks claims that in such cases there are what he calls membership categorization devices which allow us to assign certain meanings to words like baby and mommy. In this case, we put the words into a set like baby, mommy, daddy rather than one like baby, child, adult;

consequently, we understand that it is the baby's mother who is involved in the second sentence.

we interpret the following relationship quite differently: 'The baby cried. The adult picked it up.' One assumption we apparently share with others who use such sentences is that the world is ordered in such a way that there are certain categories of relationships that are expressed through language. To interpret particular sentences or sets of sentences, we must have some knowledge of the categories that speakers find relevant This knowledge of membership categorization devices is socially acquired. It is also the kind of knowledge in which ethnomethodologists are interested.

We constantly label people, places, and events around us and come to rely on such labels to help us deal with what is going on. Such labeling systems must be learned. What exactly is a 'jock,' a 'convenience store,' or a 'tweet'? 'Correct' labeling enables us to negotiate our way in society; 'incorrect' labeling is likely to lead to misunderstanding or possibly even to psychiatric care. If X is indeed a jock and you have correctly identified him as such, you have some idea of what to expect of each other. Misidentification in either direction is likely to produce disorder. If both parties know what a convenience store is and how people usually ask for and give directions, you may be directed to the nearest one.

Commonsense knowledge and practical reasoning

Ethnomethodologists adopt what is called a phenomenological view of the world; that is, the social world is something that is constituted and maintained through people's everyday experiences. In this view, language plays a very significant role in that creating and sustaining. Ethnomethodologists regard 'meaning' and 'meaningful activity' as something people accomplish when they interact socially. They focus on what people must do to make sense of, and bring order to, the world around them, and not on what scientists do in trying to explain natural phenomena. Since much of human interaction is actually verbal interaction, they have focused much of their attention on how people use language in their relationships to one another. An important aspect of this is reflexivity: the notion that interactions are shaped in relation to the context, while the context is redefined by the ongoing interactions. Further, there is a focus on how people employ what ethnomethodologists call commonsense knowledge and practical reasoning in the use of language. Commonsense knowledge refers to a variety of things. It is the understandings, recipes, maxims, and definitions that we employ in daily living as

we go about doing things, for example, knowing that thunder usually accompanies lightning; knowing how houses are usually laid out and lived in; knowing how to make a telephone call; knowing that bus drivers do not take checks; knowing that there are 'types' of people, objects, and events. This stock of commonsense knowledge is acquired through experience; but since each person's experience is different from that of everyone else, the knowledge varies from person to person.

Practical reasoning refers to the way in which people make use of their commonsense knowledge and to how they employ that knowledge in their conduct of everyday life: what they assume; what they never question; how they select matters to deal with; and how they make the various bits and pieces of commonsense knowledge fit together in social encounters so as to maintain 'normal' appearances.

It is quite different from logical thinking or the formation and testing of scientific hypotheses, both of which we usually learn in formal settings and have very specialized goals.

Garfinkel asked his students to report a conversation and state how the participants understood what they were talking about. To do so, it was necessary not only to interpret what was actually said but also to contrast the said with the unsaid, that is, that which was implied or that which could possibly be inferred, and to make hypotheses about how the various bits and pieces of the conversation fitted together as they did. Each party necessarily had to know a lot about the other party, about the topic, and about the kind of exchange the conversation was; each also had to tolerate considerable inexplicitness in what was actually said. For example, in part of one reported conversation between a husband and wife, the wife's question, 'Did you take him [our son] to the record store?' leads to the following exchange with her husband (1972, 4), with the words actually spoken on the left and the husband's interpretation of these words given on the right:

HUSBAND:	No, to the shoe repair shop.	No, I stopped at the record store on the way to get him and stopped at the shoe repair shop on the way home when he was with me.
WIFE:	What for?	I know of one reason why you might have stopped at the shoe repair shop. Why did you in fact?
HUSBAND:	I got some new shoe laces for my shoes.	As you will remember, I broke a shoe lace on one of my brown oxfords the other day, so I stopped to get some new laces.
WIFE:	Your loafers need new heels badly.	Something else you could have gotten that I was thinking of. You could have taken in your black loafers which need heels badly. You'd better get them taken

Garfinkel points out that in such exchanges matters not mentioned or only partially mentioned are still understood, that understanding itself develops as the conversation develops, and that understanding depends on the willingness of each party to work with the other to develop a common scheme of interpretation for what is being talked about.

much of what we take for granted in our dealings with others depends on our accepting the appearances those others try to project. In other words, we accept the world for what it is, and most of what we hear we accept in good faith, and what we doubt we may find hard to confront openly. We accept certain norms; we realize that these vary from occasion to occasion so that different ones may apply in specific instances, but norms do apply. It is our job to find or negotiate the ones appropriate to an occasion – in fact, it is everyone's job!

Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis

Ethnomethodologists have found that naturally occurring conversations provide them with some of their most interesting data. Such conversations show how individuals achieve common purposes by doing and saying certain things and not doing and saying others. They obey certain rules of cooperation, trust, turn-taking, and so on. The type of discourse analysis which focuses on these rules for conversation is called conversation analysis;

Linguistic Ethnography

In recent years linguistic ethnography (LE; sometimes also called 'sociolinguistic ethnography') has emerged as a cover term for research which links ethnographic research on ideologies and wider societal norms with the analyses of specific language practices. Creese (2008, 233) explains 'An LE analysis then attempts to combine close detail of local action and interaction as embedded in a wider social world.' Much of this research has been done within the realm of education.

A concept central to this work is that while we can identify hegemonic ideologies – for instance, the language ideology of normative monolingualism.

In a study of children in a German-English bilingual classroom in Berlin, Germany, Fuller (2012) notes that there is an explicit norm of separation of languages, referenced by everyone: the principal, the teachers, and the students. This norm

should dictate that there would be no bilingual discourse in the classrooms, but that is not the reality. However, the children in this study do not simply violate the rule of monolingual discourse and take the consequences; as students in an elite program and speakers of two prestigious languages, they have a great deal to lose if they speak a stigmatized mixed variety. Instead, they often use flagged code switching, that is, switches from one language to the next that are marked by comment, laughter, or repair. These data, collected during English instruction, show that most of the switches occur as singly occurring German lexical items embedded in otherwise English utterances. The students construct themselves as English speakers while simultaneously, by 'slipping' into German, construct themselves as dominant in German. Thereby they access the cultural capital of being an English speaker while simultaneously enjoying the peer solidarity of being a German speaker. Through the flagging of the switches, they can also align themselves with the normative ideology of monolingualism. Such a practice serves to position these bilinguals as part of an educated elite, that is, as English speakers, without sacrificing all of the covert prestige of using the peer language, German.

Chapter Summary

This chapter returns to the idea of communicative competence, and links it to ethnographic approaches to sociolinguistic research, with a particular focus on ethnography of communication. This framework is designed to identify how participants in particular cultural events themselves, structure communicative practices, and what underlying assumptions are at work. We also look at ethnomethodology, which is used in conversation analysis; this methodology focuses on patterns in everyday interactions. Finally, we introduce linguistic ethnography, which is a relatively new approach in sociolinguistics, which integrates the study of linguistic practices in a particular setting with ethnographically gained knowledge about societal norms and ideologies.