The Ethnography of Communication

Presented by: Dr. Alicia Pousada (2004)

Introduction

- The ethnography of communication refers to the in-depth study of the ways of communicating within a particular speech community.
- In this unit, students will learn:
  - The basic concepts underlying the ethnography of communication.
  - The elements necessary to prepare an effective ethnography of communication.
The ethnography of communication (or speaking, as it was first called) stems from the work of anthropological linguists Dell Hymes and John Gumperz (1964, 1972).

Hymes, in particular, was concerned about the growing schism between studies of language structure and language use.

Hymes set forth basic elements to be considered when examining a speech event in a given speech community.

His model has been put into practice in numerous studies in widely disparate speech communities around the world.

Other important figures in the development of the ethnography of communication are: Richard Bauman, Joel Sherzer, and Muriel Saville-Troike (see references).
Overview cont...

- Hymes wanted linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists to pay attention to communicative competence.

- **Communicative competence** refers to the knowledge that every competent member of a speech community has that makes it possible for that individual to use linguistic forms in appropriate ways to accomplish particular goals.

Terminology

Key terms involved in the ethnography of communication include:

- Speech community
- Speech situation
- Speech event
- Speech act
Terminology cont...

- A speech community is a group of speakers who share at least one communicative variety and the norms for its appropriate use. It is usually (but not necessarily) circumscribed geographically.
- Examples would be: clans, tribes, sectors, neighborhoods, cliques, religious congregations, towns, clubs, school classes, etc.

Terminology cont....

- A speech situation is any social situation in which speech is an element. Most human interactions involve speech in some way, so this is a fairly broad category.
- Note: the absence of speech can be meaningful within a speech situation and should be included in the analysis.
Examples of speech situations would be: student assemblies, football games, weddings, religious services, graduations, driving tests, trials, medical consultations, etc.

A speech event is the basic unit for analysis of communicative interaction in speech communities. Speech events are social events which are carried out through communicative means, especially speech.
Examples of speech events include: speeches, verbal duels, flirtations, wedding vows, prayers, classroom lessons, etc.

A speech act is the smallest element of communication. It may consist of sentences or phrases, usually grouped in pairs called adjacency pairs.

Speech acts are highly formulaic in most societies, and the rules for cultural appropriateness may vary greatly.
Terminology cont...

- Examples of speech acts would include:
  - Greetings/farewells
  - Questions/answers
  - Orders/compliances or refusals
  - Invitations/acceptances or rejections
  - Threats/promises/warnings
  - Compliments
  - Performatives (speech acts that perform social acts just by being uttered, e.g. saying “I do” in a wedding ceremony).

Terminology cont...

- To better visualize the relationship among these terms, imagine an American football game.
  - Speech community—somewhere in US
  - Speech situation—football game
  - Speech events—pre-game prayer, coach’s pep talk, huddle, cheers, etc.
  - Speech acts—invocations, exhortations, calling out plays, etc.
Elements of an ethnography of communication

- The mnemonic device: SPEAKING encodes the different elements needed for an adequate ethnography of communication
- Each letter of the word SPEAKING represents an element.

SPEAKING mnemonic

- S = setting, scene, situation
- P = participants (interlocutors)
- E = ends (goals and outcomes)
- A = acts (speech acts)
- K = key (mood; e.g. serious, humorous)
- I = instrumentalities (channel or mode of discourse (oral, written, gestural, etc.)—also form (standard, non-standard, regional, etc.)
- N = norms of interpretation and interaction
- G = genres (e.g. song, myth, joke, poem, etc.)
Analysis of speech events--

#1: Telling a knock-knock joke

- **Setting**=almost any informal situation
- **Participants**=at least two, at least one of which is usually a child
- **Ends**=entertainment
- **Acts**=formulaic questions and answers with word play in final response
- **Key**=humorous, silly
- **Instrumentalities**=oral speech
- **Norms**=interpreted as humorous and dumb—appropriate for children or adults acting childishly
- **Genre**=riddle, word play

#2: Traditional marriage proposal (USA)

- **Setting**=usually private but can be public
- **Participants**=at least two, usually man (proposer) and woman (proposee) involved in intimate relationship
- **Ends**=matrimony
- **Acts**=often formulaic questions whose answers depend on proposee’s disposition—end with acceptance or rejection
- **Key**=serious, committed
- **Instrumentalities**=oral speech, symbolic ring, gestures like taking hand, kneeling, etc.
#2: Marriage proposal cont...

- **Norms**=usually interpreted as serious commitment and causes strong emotion in both participants—only considered appropriate if both have expressed love to one another previously and conditions are propitious for marriage—otherwise may be rejected or taken as joke—proposee waits until proposal is complete before responding—interruptions not permitted
- **Genre**=proposal

Try this one: a gossip session

- **Setting**=
- **Participants**=
- **Ends**=
- **Acts**=
- **Key**=
- **Instrumentalities**=
- **Norms**=
- **Genre**=
Try another one: a classroom lesson

- Setting=
- Participants=
- Ends=
- Acts=
- Key=
- Instrumentalities=
- Norms=
- Genre=

Summary

In this presentation, we have seen:

- The development of the ethnography of communication as a field
- The hierarchical levels of communication to be analyzed
- The use of the mnemonic **SPEAKING** as a guide to speech event analysis
Conclusion

- You should now be able to identify speech communities, speech situations, speech events, and speech acts.
- You should also be able to analyze speech events you encounter in any society, no matter how exotic.

Classic references to consult