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Community

The speech community is a theoretical concept central to the study of language in culture and society. Its focus is on when and how speakers use their language system. In linguistic anthropology, speech community refers to speakers who participate in interactions based on social and cultural norms and values that are regulated, represented, and re-created through discursive practices. Because they are constructed around culturally and socially constituted interaction, speech communities cannot be defined by static physical location and can be experienced as part of a nation-state, neighborhood, village, club, compound, on-line chat room, religious institution, and so on. Though speech communities may take any and all of these forms and more, it is not an infinitely malleable concept, changing shape, form and meaning according to scholarly need or any new gathering of people. Rather, a speech community reflects what people do and know when they interact with one another. It assumes that when people come together through discursive practices, they behave as though they operate within a shared set of norms, local knowledge, beliefs, and values. It means that they are aware of these things and capable of knowing when they are being adhered to and when the values of the community are being ignored. Because a speech community is constructed around the knowledge of communicative practices as well as their implementation, it is fundamental in understanding identity and representation of ideology. Thus it is central to the discussion of linguistic concerns like mutual intelligibility, variation and communicative competence, as well as cultural, political, and sociolinguistic concerns like language and gender, nationalism, transnationalism, ethnicity, social class, and so on. One's speech community can multiply during the life cycle, and, indeed, there are cases where a member exchanges one community for another, vowing never to speak using the same ideological system associated with the rejected speech community.

Linguistic anthropology's use of speech community was first formulated when ethnographic research centered exclusively on daily life and rituals, largely ignoring influence from other cultures and societies. In fact, Leonard Bloomfield's description of speech community assumed a shared single language within a single community. Formal linguistics' definition of speech community was even more rigid, and an idealized notion of homogeneous language use was considered the norm. This idealization was also typical among dialectologists who considered linguistic homogeneity fundamental to the identification of regional speech and suggested that the geographical boundaries of lexical items represented the boundaries of speech communities. Yet research in urban areas and language contact situations, especially pidgin and creole language studies and bilingual and multilingual societies, quickly revealed the limits of a definition focused exclusively on language theory rather than language in social life. Through the arguments and research of scholars such as William Labov, John Gumperz, Dell Hymes, and Michael Halliday, it became clear that the focus should be on interaction as a social process. This is not to say that speech communities do not conflict over issues of linguistic diversity as well. For example, the case of African American English (AAE) in the United States suggests that many Americans remain conflicted over its existence and continued use. Some believe that those who speak AAE reflect the history and politics of U.S. race and class history and relations. Others reject this theory and argue that the AAE speech community is different by choice and simply wants to be outside of the larger speech community.

While it is true that all speech communities show some variation of linguistics and what is socially and culturally acceptable and grammatical, it is also true that the current state of technological communication, globalization, and transmigration can challenge its viability as a useful concept. Yet this represents the challenge to the analyst who must work in a shrinking cultural and social world, rather than the concept itself. Speech community remains a resilient unit of analysis because the definition of language that binds it is based on the notion of diversity of language, varieties, and styles. What is shared among its members is knowledge of language ideology and attitude toward language use. This is evident in cyber chat rooms where the style of interaction constitutes the group of individuals. In this case, it is not cyber space alone that defines the speech community. Rather, it is the use and regulation of the codes of chat rooms whether in the form of symbols, turn taking, language restrictions, and topic focus—the rules of interaction constitute the identity of the chat room. This distinction has become increasingly important as people throughout the world gain access to people and cultures, including some knowledge of discursive practices.

With modernity, the accessibility of what were previously national and cultural boundaries has resulted in people from outside these cultures appropriating the language of speech communities for which they have no social or cultural relationship. In fact, cultural conflict can arise when those who are familiar with communities where they may not share membership, use a language or jargon for emphasis, play or to align with an "outside" identity within the boundaries of their own communities. In this case the

style of speaking may be readily identified as belonging to another community, but the value norms and expectations of the source community do not accompany it. What's more, the words and expressions may be used out of context and in ways considered inappropriate and offensive. Yet speech community is not a concept that unravels with conflict, complex situations, and shifts in identity. Instead of problematizing the notion of speech community, conflicts such as these highlight its efficacy in exploring the relationship between linguistics and identity, politics, and society. The concept of speech community binds the importance of local knowledge and communicative competence in discursive activities so that members can identify insiders from outsiders, those passing as members and those living in contact zones and borderlands.

(See also *contact, crossing, gender, identity, ideology, styles, switching, variation*)

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