# Module 5: Communities of Language Users

## Before you Read

What comprises a community of “language users”? This may seem like an easy question answer: a community of language users is a group of people who share a language, right? Well, maybe. In order to conduct research with a group of people, it is important to know exactly what we mean by **speech**, **practice**, and **community.** In this module, we will re-visit some of **Saussure** and **Chomsky’s** ideas on the matter, but we will also be learning about the work of important linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists like **Dell Hymes**, **John Gumperz**, and **William Labov**. Each of these researchers has made extremely important contributions to our understanding of these concepts and how they can be used in the study of language as socially enacted and mediated by culture.

This week, we have a bit more reading assigned than usual. To begin with, we have a book chapter that is packed with important information. Chapter 5 of Ahearn’s book is highly informative and gives you the theoretical and conceptual background you will need to understand the two supplementary articles I have assigned for this week: Mary Bucholtz’ study of a community of nerd girls in southern California, and Miriam Meyerhoff’s discussion of female speech patterns in the pacific and whether or not the women in her study form a community of practice. Pace yourself as you read and prioritize: I have always believed that it is better to read two pieces well than to read three pieces poorly. If you find you cannot finish all three readings assigned for this week before we meet on Thursday, then choose one of the articles and read it well after you have completed Ahearn’s chapter. Keep in mind, however, that you will be held responsible for both articles in quizzes and tests.

Remember, items that have been **bolded** are especially important and are likely to appear in tests or quizzes, and should be mentioned in discussion posts. Also, this module is meant to be read *alongside* your assigned reading in order to guide and supplement the book, but is in NO WAY meant to *substitute* your reading the book!

## Focus Points

As you read, pay special attention to the following terms, concepts, and ideas.

* The problems with defining a “speech community.”
* The unique contributions of **Hymes**, **Gumperz**, and **Labov** to the speech community concept.
* Gumperz’ **formulation** of the speech community, including his **three criteria**.
* Specific ethnographic examples using the speech community concept.
* **Mary Bucholtz’** critique of the speech community concept, and some **alternatives**.
* **Communities of practice**: definition, proponents, and detractions. In particular, think about **Mary Bucholtz’** article, [“Why be normal?”](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4168925) and **Miriam Meyerhoff’s** [“Sorry in the pacific”](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4168926) as examples of anthropological writing using this concept.

## Defining “Speech,” Defining “Community”

Figuring out the boundaries of a speech community and determining who its members can be tricky when we consider:

* What is the size and location of the community? Can one person *be* a speech community? Does the community have to exist in physical time and space or can it exist elsewhere such as online or as an “imagined community”?
* If people share a particular language but nothing else, *should* they be considered a speech community? Under what circumstances? Can multiple communities exist simultaneously in the same physical space? Can they be populated by the same people?
* What kinds of interactions “make” a speech community? How much should members of a speech community communicate with one another? Can communications take place only through the written word outside of time and place (think, for instance, of the many, many Tolkien fans who wrote what we now call “fan fiction” set in the universe of Middle Earth at different points in time before and after Tolkien’s death)?

## Early Conceptualizations of Communities of Speakers

### The Linguists

From the very beginning, linguists have recognized that languages are shared by groups of speakers. Even **de Saussure**, whose primary interest was in understanding language as a system of abstract symbols, stated that “in order to have a language, there must be a *community of speakers*” (Ahearn, 104). **Noam Chomsky** posited an **ideal speech-community**, which he admits is hypothetical and does not exist in the real world because it is made up of a group of homogenous, perfect speakers of a language (we will be talking later on about Chomsky’s ideas regarding *competence* and *performance* of language (Ahearn, 104).

### Gumperz

In his formulation of a speech community, we see three requirements that other scholars have adopted in their definition of a “speech community” (see, for instance, Miriam Meyerhoff’s [article](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4168926) for an example of how this is written about in peer-reviewed journals):

1. Frequent interaction among the members must occur.
2. The members of the speech community must share a **“verbal repertoire.”**
3. Members of the community must also share certain **language ideologies.**

## Criticism of the Speech Communities Concept

**Mary Bucholtz**, who also wrote the other [article](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4168925) I assigned this week, finds some problems with the speech community model as it has been used in linguistic anthropological analysis. She lists six ways in which the concept of speech community is inadequate:

1. Its tendency to take language as central
2. Its emphasis on consensus as the organizing principle of community.
3. Its preference for studying central members of the community instead of those on the periphery.
4. Its focus on the group rather than the individuals who make up the group.
5. Its view of identity as a set of static categories.
6. Its valorization of researchers’ interpretations over participants’ own understandings of their practices.

Keep these criticisms in mind as we begin to discuss the idea of **communities of practice**.

## Alternatives

### Building on/refining/working with

Although Ahearn emphasizes the importance of the communities of practice model, she also includes some alternative ways in which anthropologists have built on the speech communities model in order to refine it (specifically, be sure to familiarize yourself with **nested speech-comunities** [Ahearn pg.108]**, speech areas** [Ahearn pg. 111-112], and Debra Spitulnik’s **re-working of the concept** in [her work in Zambia](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/jlin.1996.6.2.161/pdf) [Ahearn pg. 109-110]).

### Speech Networks

The speech network concept is based on social network analysis. The focus, rather than an entire community or specific individuals, is on the social relationships between its members. In this approach, members can also be members of multiple (related or un-related) networks, sequentially or simultaneously. Individuals’ ties then vary:

* Strong or weak ties (kinship? Friendship? Acquaintanceship?)
* Multiplex or uniplex networks (multiplex: individuals are connected in multiple ways; uniplex: individuals are only connected in one way).
* High density of low density networks (high-density: many people in the network know one another; low-density: many people in the network do not know one another.

### Communities of Practice

The three main criteria for identifying a **community of practice** are as follows:

1. Mutual engagement.
2. Joint enterprise.
3. Shared repertoire.

Let’s compare these criteria to the criteria outlined above to describe a **speech community:**

1. Frequent interaction among the members must occur.
2. The members of the speech community must share a **“verbal repertoire.”**
3. Members of the community must also share certain **language ideologies.**

**“Mutual engagement”** is not all that different from “**frequent interaction,”** though the flexibility of the term “mutual engagement” suggests that interaction does not have to be necessarily “frequent.” Both concepts also emphasize the need for a **shared repertoire** which means that in both speech communities and communities of practice, members have to share some form of linguistic repertoire that marks the community as distinct. The key difference betwee these two terms is **Practice:** whereas the speech community appears to be a static construct (the shared language ideologies do not appear subject to change), the community of practice is united by **joint enterprise**, which is another way of saying that the members of the community of practice are all working towards some sort of unifying goal. It doesn’t matter what the goal is: it can be something as simple as living together as a family, being students in a particular class, working in the same job, belonging to the same guild in *World of Warcraft*… the point is, *something* is driving a group of people towards some sort of action.

In other words:

***“The community of practice takes us away from the community defined by a location or a population. Instead, it focuses on a community defined by social engagement”*** (Ahearn, pg.116).

## Conclusion

This module, we’ve learned about how anthropologists conceptualize groups of people. Think about the two articles I assigned for this week, and how each one uses both the speech community *and* the community of practice model. Try to think like an anthropologist –why does it matter which concept you use? In what ways do the filters we use to conceptualize the world “matter”?

## Disclaimer

The material presented in this module is not exhaustive; it is meant to function as a guide to our course materials. Concepts, key terms, and ethnographic examples that appear in our readings or that are discussed in future f2f classes can and will be used in assessments even if they are not specifically mentioned in this course module.