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COMMENTARY

Expanding Ethnography of Communication Research: Toward Ethnographies of Encoding

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The Ethnography of Communication research agenda, as it has been incorporated into the field of Communication over the past 3 decades, has made considerable contributions to our understanding of the cultural and social coding of language-in-use. This article argues that further development of this research agenda requires ethnographies that attend to processes of encoding, including their precoded phases, and pay greater attention to the temporality, performativity, and materiality of communication. This is illustrated with reference to the rapidly shifting contemporary techno-social environments communicators face today.

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One of the persistent challenges of contemporary communication research is the need to develop systematic approaches for describing, analyzing, and theorizing the multiple uses of signs—linguistic and those involving other semiotic modalities—across social situations and cultural contexts, and in the face of rapidly changing communication technologies. The interplay between the means of communication and the cultural and social meanings they acquire in and through their various contexts of use has been at the heart of the research paradigm known as the Ethnography of Communication (hence, EC), the second of three paradigms Duranti (2003) has identified in the history of American linguistic anthropology in the 20th century.

Within this paradigm, languages—and by extension, other sign systems—are viewed as culturally organized and organizing resources that vary across speakers, speech activities, and speech situations. Dell Hymes, one of the founders of EC in the 1960s, formulated the goal of theorizing in EC, saying that "a theory, whatever its logic and insight, is inadequate if divorced from, if unilluminating as to, the ways of life of mankind as a whole" (1972, p. 41). In this view, ways of speaking and ways of life are intertwined, and social life can be studied with reference to culturally inflected "speech events" around which social communication is organized. The notion of "speech event" as an analytic unit of social organization serves to describe and analyze communicative exchanges as bounded and as both sequentially and contextually patterned. Hymes' heuristic model specifies the various components of speech events through the mnemonic of SPEAKING. These components—**S**etting

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(spatial and temporal), **P**articipants, **E**nds (goals and outcomes), **A**cts, **K**ey (or tone), **I**nstrumentalities (channel, media), **N**orms (of production and interpretation), and **G**enres—have provided ethnographers with a flexible analytic resource for a wide range of cultural descriptions and cross-cultural comparisons of communicative conduct.

In the mid-1970s, this research agenda was incorporated into the field of Communication through the work of Gerry Philipsen (later reconceptualized in Philipsen, 1992), and has since been further elaborated, theorized, and empirically expanded to cultural settings around the world by him, his associates, and generations of his students. Much of this expansion of EC research, as well as its institutionalization through graduate teaching, took place within the past 25 years (as is indicated by several review articles dealing with the contributions of the EC perspective within Communication; Carbaugh, 2008, 2010; Fitch, 2001; Philipsen & Coutu, 2005). EC studies variously explored localized patterns of communicative conduct such as greeting rituals, cultural communication styles characterized in terms of (in)tolerance to open conflict, and culturally demarcated speech events such as sociable gatherings or public speeches. Building on this empirical pool, Philipsen formulated a broad-ranging social constructionist approach to the study of the interplay between the means and meanings of communication and their cultural inflections, which came to be known as speech code theory (Philipsen, 1997, 2008; Philipsen, Coutou, & Covarrubias, 2005). In his definition, "speech codes are historically situated and socially constructed systems of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules about communication conduct" (2008, p. 4771), and serve as resources that cultural members share for enacting, interpreting, and evaluating communicative conduct.

Studies encompassed by speech codes theory did much to consolidate the EC perspective within Communication research, heralding something of an "ethnographic turn" in several other subfields of the discipline as well—such as language and social interaction, intercultural communication scholarship as well as research in interpersonal and organizational communication. The shaping role of culture as a coded system and a shared resource has become widely acknowledged as has the value of ethnographic studies designed to identify, analyze, and compare speech codes within and across cultural settings. Studies have also recognized the copresence of multiple codes, code clashes in code-mixing (hybrid codes) in most societies and in a wide range of cultural contact situations. Yet, EC research has tended to address codes as "historically situated," already emplaced, stressing the spatial rather than the temporal dimension constituting the Hymesean category of Setting—a static perspective that does not address the temporality implicit in processes of encoding as those processes that establish stabilized codes for the communication of meanings and/or shared sensibilities. In what follows, I therefore ask what engaging with processes of encoding would mean within an EC perspective, taking the emergence of media technologies as my example.

Indeed, the technologization of social interaction in the communication environments we inhabit today invites a focus on how codes emerge in and through situated improvisational practices (Meyer & Girke, 2011). It also suggests ample research sites in and through which such processes can be observed and contemplated. Within the EC paradigm, a focus on the new rules, assumptions, and meanings attending the use of newly introduced media, such as the Internet or mobile phones, highlights the category of Instrumentalities in Hymes' model of the components of speech events. Notably, Hymes' call for "accounts of the interdependence of channels in interaction and the relative hierarchy among them" (1972, p. 63) recognizes the complex relations in which communication channels are embedded, and opens the door to the treatment of Instrumentalities in temporal terms that respond to conditions of technological change. More recently, Donal Carbaugh voiced a similar interest, pointing to the interest of EC research in "the various media used when communicating and their comparative analysis, such as online 'messaging' and how it compares to face-to-face messaging" (2008, p. 1592).

Thus, while the essential "mediality of language" (Eisenlohr, 2011)—acoustically carried by sound waves—tends to recede into the background in the kind of face-to-face contexts of copresence that have until recently dominated EC studies, in today's fieldwork settings, processes of mediation are perforce brought into sharp relief. And while EC studies that have singled out media-defined research sites in the past—such as TV talk shows (Carbaugh, 1988) or call-in radio (Katriel, 2004)—have focused on identifying and describing the context-specific speech codes detectable in them (American talk or therapeutic discourse, respectively), the rapidly changing techno-social settings of today call attention to the encoding of new patterns and norms of communication as a process-in-time, including its precoded moments of indeterminate meanings and potentials for action, which Ian Hutchby (2001) has insightfully discussed as the "affordances" of technological media.

The conjunction of a theoretical interest in encoding processes and in the role of media technologies in their emergence and its social implications suggests two main complementary lines of inquiry. The first follows the EC tradition and consists of studies that explore already (if tentatively) emplaced new codes related to the use of new communication technologies. In many cases, they involve radical interrogations of premises and terms used to describe and analyze communication, acknowledging new phenomena, and categories such as new forms of telepresence, new types of social relations (such as intimacy at a distance), different configurations of virtual communities, the slippage between private and public, the ever-shifting norms of accessibility, and more (Katriel, 1999).

The second line of inquiry relates to the fundamental materiality of communication and its social consequences (Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer, 1994), bringing EC research closer to the particular interests of science and technology studies that foreground the ever-shifting materiality and artifactual nature of communication technologies. The new affordances introduced by technological innovations generate a heightened sense of reflexivity concerning the communication process itself so that they never

quite recede into the coded environment. This reflexivity is directly related to the precoded, sensory-experiential materiality of objects in the world (including the visual and tactile lure of various surfaces and screens), and their contingent potential for use (Pink, 2009). The materiality of communication can be approached through modes of inquiry that foreground embodied knowledge, performative practice, and reflexivity in a variety of *in situ*, participatory fieldwork practices (Conquergood, 1991).

Of the various approaches to the study of materiality, the one of particular relevance to the present discussion involves the use of a semiotic perspective to the study of material things (Keane, 2003). Paul Manning and Ilana Gershon (2014) have recently proposed an approach to the study of the materiality of communication grounded in Peircean semiotics and phenomenology (see also Bodie & Crick, 2014). To them, the materiality of the sign "is that which is not part of the process of representing, the leftover that is unique to the way the specific sign exists in the world. The 'material qualities' of an object are precisely those real qualities *not yet* significant semiotically, for example, for the word 'man' written down, the fact that the letters are flat and without relief" (Peirce, 1868).

Manning and Gershon propose three research foci for the study of the materiality of signs as precoded or as "not yet significant semiotically" — processes of entextualization; participation structures; and remediation. In each, questions about encoding processes arise and both the open potentials for action and the often unexpected ways in which the affordances of new media become stabilized and encoded come to the fore. Thus, the telephone, originally designed for instrumental purposes, has turned into a tool of sociability and is no longer dominated by a code of speech efficiency as it was in its first days. Or, the unanticipated ubiquity, versatility, and inventiveness of written communication in the age of social media and mobile telephony have reshaped literacy practices, creating new "named" forms of writing such as blogging, tweeting and texting, and new interrelations between oral and written codes.

With an eye to the future, the projected development of wearable communication technology that integrates a variety of sensors for monitoring interlocutors' physiological states (such as heart rate), which has recently received some media attention, provides another interesting example. Wearable media accentuate people's ongoing accessibility to communication even beyond that afforded by today's mobile phones, giving rise, for example, to new processes of encoding responsiveness to communicative appeals (or signifying disinterest in them), and so forth. Routinely worn accessories that serve as technologies for communication may thus have far-reaching implications for the ways people experience and organize their sociality no less than watches have had for the experience and regulation of time. In fact, the "instrument" metaphor that grounds our view of media and its "use" may well need to be replaced by a more clearly relational one that signals being "plugged in" or "being in touch." As medium-specific codes begin to emerge out of the precoded, open-ended affordances of these devices, they will tap into local, culturally inflected codes of wearability and bodily aesthetics in varied and unexpected ways. The sensory devices integrated into these wearable media create additional affordances, potentially augmenting

interlocutors' resources in terms of particular kinds of nonverbal signals, which can become part of communication processes as they become encoded over time, turning into resources for interpersonal communication. Ethnographic attention to the affordances of wearable media, whose meaning and import may vary across settings and cultural contexts, requires attention to their materiality as artifacts. This means that EC studies must also trace the shifting affordances of new objects in their precoded phase by addressing their iconic and indexical dimensions as signs rather than wait for the processes of signification in which these artifacts partake to become stabilized and fully encoded.

Thus, code-centered theories account for the culturally shared systems of symbols and meanings that make societies and social life possible (including, of course, the social exclusions that are themselves grounded in the differential mastery of codes). I have suggested that the ongoing technologically induced changes in contemporary social settings, and their attendant destabilization of codes, has turned the study of encoding processes more pressing than ever before, and that a focus on the materiality of communication and its semiotic theorization appear a productive move in that direction. Can a theoretical recognition of the temporally anchored, potentially transformative, precoded moments of engagement with new media be integrated into current dematerialized code-based approaches to communication within the EC paradigm? This is, I believe, a question worth pursuing.

Notably, research in what Duranti (2003) has identified as the third (and most recent) paradigm in American Linguistic Anthropology, offers various theorizations and empirical explorations that go beyond a representational symbols-and-meanings approach to communication processes, taking up issues of indexicality and performativity, and addressing the "not yet significant semiotically," as defined in Manning and Gershon's abovementioned account of the materiality of communication. This theorizing usefully interrogates the role of code-centered perspectives on communication, and appears to invite EC researchers to train their eyes on processes of encoding as well, and thereby enrich our overall understanding of codes.

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