Ethnography of Communication

Donal Carbaugh
University of Massachusetts Amherst

What are the means of communication used by people when they conduct their everyday lives; and what meanings does this communication have for them? These are central questions guiding the ethnography of communication. The ethnography of communication is an approach, a perspective, and a method to and in the study of culturally distinctive means and meanings of communication. The approach has been used to produce hundreds of research reports about locally patterned practices of communication, and has focused attention primarily on the situated uses of language. It has also been productively applied to various other means and media of communication including oral and printed literature, broadcast media, writing systems, various gestural dynamics, silence, visual signs, the Internet, and so on.

NATURE OF THE APPROACH

The approach is concerned with (1) the linguistic resources people use in context, not just grammar in the traditional sense, but the socially situated uses and meanings of words, their relations, and sequential forms of expression; (2) the various media used when communicating, and their comparative analysis, such as online "messaging" and how it compares to face-to-face messaging; (3) the way verbal and nonverbal signs create and reveal social codes of identity, relationships, emotions, place, and communication itself. Reports about these and other dynamics focus on particular ways a medium of communication is used (e.g., how Saudis use online communication, or how the Amish use computers), on particular ways of speaking (e.g., arranged by national, ethnic, and/or gendered styles), on the analysis of particular communicative events (e.g., political elections, oratory, deliberations), on specific acts of communication (e.g., apologizing, campaigning), and on the role of communication in specific institutions of social life (e.g., medicine, politics, law, education, religion).

In addition to its focus on locally distinctive practices of communication, the ethnography of communication is also guided by a *particular methodology* and general concerns in theory development. As a theoretical perspective, it offers a range of concepts for understanding communication in any possible scene and/or community; as a methodology it offers procedures for analyzing communication practices as formative of social life. The methodology typically involves various procedures for empirical analysis including participant observation in the contexts of everyday, social life, as well as interviewing participants about communication in those contexts (→ Research Methods).

ORIGINS

The ethnography of communication was founded by Dell Hymes. In 1962, he published a paper that called for a new area of study, a kind of linguistics that explored language not just as a formal system of grammar, but as something culturally shaped in the

contexts of social life. At the same time, he called for a kind of anthropology that took speaking, and communication broadly, as its focal subject matter. The two interests, together, helped establish an innovative enterprise, a kind of linguistic study that was grounded in the social life of language; and in turn, a kind of cultural study focused on speaking and communication generally. In 1964, Hymes and his colleague John Gumperz published a special section of the journal *American Anthropologist* on the subject, which formed, in 1972, the basis of a highly influential reader, pioneering a general path for ethnographic studies of communication (see Gumperz and Hymes 1972).

Collections of research reports were published in the 1970s that helped move such study from the periphery of some disciplinary concerns in linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and rhetoric to more central concerns in the study of communication and culture. These studies explored aspects of communication that were often overlooked, such as gender role enactment, the social processes of litigation, marginalized styles, social uses of verbal play, and culturally distinctive styles of speaking (e.g., Bauman and Sherzer 1974). By the late 1980s and 1990s, a bibliography of over 250 research papers in the ethnography of communication was published, with another reader and several books appearing (e.g., Katriel 1986; Philipsen and Carbaugh 1986; Carbaugh 1990). These demonstrated how communication was a culturally distinctive activity while examining issues such as the ways communication varied by social agent and class, communication on and about popular movies, talk as done on television, relationships between speaking and silence, and intercultural interactions, as well as Native American poetics, political speech, verbal dueling, and verbal arts generally.

CONCEPTUALIZING BASIC UNITS OF COMMUNICATION

The ethnography of communication offers a system of concepts that can be used to conceptualize the basic phenomena of study, and a set of components for detailed analyses of those phenomena. The phenomena of study are understood to be, fundamentally, communication phenomena, and thus the ethnographic design focuses investigators on communication as both the data of concern and the primary theoretical concern. Hymes introduced several concepts as basic units for the ethnographic study of communication. Chief among these are communication event, communication act, communication situation, and speech community.

Ethnographers of communication start their analyses by focusing on uses of the means and meanings of communication in particular socio-cultural lives. As a result, the locus of the study is on the practice of communication in contexts. The concept of *communication event* has become a prominent starting point for these analyses, for it draws attention to communicative action as formative of social processes and sequences. A communication event is understood to be, from the point of view of participants, an integral, patterned part of social life. Like gossip sessions, talk shows, and political meetings, communication events typically involve a sequential structuring of acts, can be understood by formulating norms or rules about them, and involve culturally bounded aspects of social life which have a beginning and ending.

Communication events involve actions of many kinds. As such, events can be understood as the conduct of social actions, with *communication act* being the concept

that brings together the performance of that action and its interpretation. One might say, e.g., "I enjoy hiking." This saying might perform many actions: it might be used to explain one's office decorations, to account for one's attire, to counter others with anti-hiking interests, and so on. The concept of communication act, then, ties ethnographic analyses to specific social interactions in order to understand the range of conduct and actions that is getting done within them. Communication acts are most typically parts of larger sequences of social actions and in this sense are often usefully conceptualized as integral aspects of communication events.

In any human community, there are many places where communication is expected (or prohibited). These enter into ethnographies of communication as aspects of a setting in which communication itself takes shape. The concept of *communication situation* is used to identify specific settings and scenes for communication. For example, in some communities, communication situations involve the front porch, the television lounge, the bar, or a medical office (→ Communities of Practice). Unlike communication events, such as a church service, which are typically governed by a set of special rules and sequences, communication situations may involve activities with some particular boundaries or shapes, but without a strict sequencing of acts or activities.

A *speech community* is a group of people who share rules for using and interpreting at least one communication practice. A communication practice might involve specific events, acts, or situations, with the use and interpretation of at least one essential for membership in a speech community. The term "speech" is used here to stand in for various means of communication, verbal and nonverbal, written and oral; the term "community," while minimally involving one practice, in actuality typically involves many, and is thus used to embrace the diversity in the means and meanings available for communication.

As communities of people gather in communication, so do they conduct themselves in particular ways. It is these patterned *ways of speaking* – e.g., about politics, in worship, or in education – that identify in which community one is, indeed who and where one is. In this sense, ethnographers of communication explore various ways of communicating, the situated variety in the events, acts, and situations of communicative life. Of special interest are specific situations and events in which different cultural styles of communication are simultaneously active (→ Interactional Sociolinguistics; Intercultural and Intergroup Communication; Intercultural Norms; Intergroup Contact and Communication).

COMPONENTS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION

Once ethnographers of communication have identified a specific event, act, situation, or community for study, a subsequent move is the analysis of that selected practice as a multi-faceted phenomenon. This involves a particular methodology: the systematic analysis of the selected practice as it has been observed in its normal social contexts, and as it is discussed by participants. These analyses are conducted systematically through a range of components. These components were originally formulated by Hymes, and involve explorations of the variety of dimensions of each such communication practice.

The components were summarized by Hymes using the mnemonic device *SPEAKING*, which will be used here for their brief discussion. As Hymes discussed, each component

invites us to ask certain questions about the communication practice of concern. Questions such as these provide abstract theoretical bases for analyses that accomplish many objectives, including an understanding of the special qualities of specific communication practices (e.g., how Nigerian social interaction appropriates texts from popular culture), and what is common across a variety of practices. In other words, the components structure both descriptive and comparative analyses.

S: What are the *setting* and *scene* of the communication practice? This component explores two aspects of context: the physical setting in which it takes place, and the scene, i.e., the participants' sense of what is going on when this practice is active. Analyzing the setting and scenic qualities of the practice helps ground the analyses in the specific contexts of social life.

P: Who are the *participants* in this practice? A significant shift is marked here in conceptualizing communication as an event in which people participate, and thus the key concept is "participant" (in the event). This moves away from typical encoding and decoding models, or others which focus initially on senders and receivers of messages. What if a practice such as "reading the paper" is considered an event? Who are the participants in that practice?

E: What are the *ends* of this practice? This asks about two ends: the goals participants may have in doing the practice, and the outcomes actually achieved. In the event of joke-telling, many of us are familiar with an off-color joke, the goal of which was to entertain, with the outcome offending. Communication practice, generally, may target some goals, yet attain other outcomes (intended and not).

A: What *act sequence* is involved in and for this practice? The practice is part of social interaction. When does it arise and as part of what sequence? And further, what are the content of the practice and its form? This component invites a careful look at the sequential organization of the practice, its message content, and form.

K: How is the practice being *keyed*? What is the emotional pitch, feeling, or spirit of the communication practice? Regarding funerals, most are keyed as reverent and serious. Other events, such as some talk shows, can be keyed as more light-hearted. The ways practices are keyed, and the ways the key can shift from moment to moment, are questions raised and analyzed with this component.

I: What is the *instrument* or channel being used in this communication practice? The oral mode may be necessary, or it could be prohibited in favor of a specific gesture or bodily movement. Is a technological channel preferred, or prohibited? Should the practice be conducted in print or via a face-to-face channel, through song or chanting? The range of instruments being used to design a practice, and the ways each is interpreted, are entered into the analysis here.

N: What *norms* are active when communication is practiced in this way and in this community? This component distinguishes the two senses of norms that may be relevant to a communication practice: what is done normally as a matter of habit (e.g., few vote), and what is the appropriate thing to do (e.g., one should vote in every election). Standards of normalcy can be productively distinguished from the morally infused, normative dimensions of communication practices.

There is a second distinction that guides this component: norms for interaction can be distinguished from norms of interpretation. The norm for interaction can be formulated

as a rule for how one should properly interact when conducting the practice of concern: e.g., one should respect one's elders. The norm for interpretation can be formulated as a rule for what a practice means: e.g., sitting in silence with an elder counts as respecting that elder (→ Discourse Comprehension). Both norms are analyzed through this component.

G: Is there a *genre* of communication of which this practice is an instance? This might involve identifying the practice as a type of a formal genre such as verbal dueling, or a riddle, or a narrative. As a result, the properties of those formal genres become relevant to its analysis. Alternately, the practice might be understood as part and parcel of a folk genre, and be analyzed accordingly.

The investigative methodology summarized here involves identifying a unit of communication practice for purposes of analysis, generating data about that practice through procedures of participant observation and interviewing, then analyzing instances of the practice through the components. For any one practice, some components may prove more fruitful for analysis than others, and thus the use of the theoretical framework itself becomes an object of reflection during the ethnographic study.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Recent ethnographies of communication have examined mass media texts in various societies, political processes at the grassroot and national levels, interpersonal communication in many cultural settings, organizational communication in various contexts from medicine to education, intercultural communication around the globe, processes of power, advantaged and disadvantaged practices, and so on. And further, these studies have been conducted in and about several languages, including Chinese, Danish, English (of several varieties), Finnish, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish (in several locations), among many others. The growing number of native ethnographers conducting ethnographies of communication in their own speech communities is important to note, for this helps generate a fund of such studies, from a variety of authors, which is ripe and rich for future comparative work.

Several trajectories of work have evolved over the years that derive from or are indebted to the ethnography of communication. Some ethnographers have recently explicated a model of communication that is a discourse-centered approach both to culture (Sherzer 1987), with developments of it through explorations of indigenous practices (Urban 1991), and to the problem of intertextuality (Bauman 2004). Other trajectories involve a newly formulated theory of cultural communication and codes (Philipsen 1997, 2002), with developments of it through applications to work organizations (Covarrubias 2002), interpersonal life (Fitch 1998), and intercultural interactions (Carbaugh 2005). There is much recent work that is comparative and focuses on aspects of conversation and media, with special attention to the ways people conceive of and evaluate television texts, various uses of the computer, and how these relate to face-to-face channels of communication (Katriel 2004). In any event, all illustrate what is culturally distinctive about communication, yet also suggest some general properties in communication, additional units for study, and so on.

And thus we have come full circle. For ethnographers of communication, communication is explored as something locally patterned and practiced as a part of social life, and

as something crucially important, being formative of all societal and cultural communities. Discovering the locally distinctive means of all communicative media is crucial to our understanding. Interpreting what meanings are associated with these various means of expression is also essential. Knowledge of what is common across our various communities of communication is being served as well. In the process, ethnographers of communication demonstrate how communication is formative of social and cultural lives, comparatively analyzing both the cultural features and the cross-cultural properties of communication.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Action-Implicative Discourse Analysis   ▶ Communities of Practice ▶ Culture and Communication, Ethnographic Perspectives on   ▶ Discourse Comprehension   ▶ Interactional Sociolinguistics ▶ Intercultural and Intergroup Communication ▶ Intercultural Norms   ▶ Intergroup Contact and Communication   ▶ Microethnography ▶ Research Methods   ▶ Speech Codes Theory

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