QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF SPEECH
77 (1991): 336–342

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

Donal Carbaugh

THE review by John Fiske of my *Talking American* [*Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 76 (1990), 450–451] provides an occasion to examine the aims of various ethnographic and critical studies of communicative practices and thus the opportunity to discuss some of his critical comments is a welcome opportunity. The fundamental issue on which he and I take differing positions seems to be the nature and function of cultural interpretation.

CULTURAL INTERPRETATION AS A PART OF ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Elsewhere, I have discussed some recent ethnographic writings on communication in order to differentiate claims within them which are interpretive (i.e., this communicative practice has these cultural meanings), from others more descriptive (i.e., a verbatim/visual/aural representation of the practice), explanatory (i.e., an account of systematic variation, or orderly differentiation, within the practice), and critical (i.e., an evaluation of the practice from an ethical juncture). Note, therefore, that cultural interpretation is seen here as a necessary part of ethnography, and distinctive as a mode of inquiry within ethnography, but is not in itself the whole of ethnographic inquiry.[1]

In order to get to the point of doing cultural interpretation, prior work has to be done including tasks theoretical (e.g., what orientation to communication, and what class of communicative phenomena, is to be studied), methodological (e.g., what data are to be generated and which interpretive procedures employed), and descriptive (e.g., recording, transcribing data). After performing (at least some part of) each task, a phase of cultural interpretation may begin.

I will define cultural interpretation as *an investigative mode the main objective of which is to render participants' communication practices coherent and intelligible, through an explication of a system of symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings which is creatively evoked in those practices.*

Several parts of this interpretive mode warrant elaboration. Most fundamentally, the mode of inquiry is *investigative*. First and foremost it responds to questions about particular communicative practices. It does not begin with an assumption or assertion about the basic determining structures of those practices, but does begin by wondering what gets said and done in some scene of social life and what people who perform within it say or think they are doing. In this sense, it is an empirical brand of study, investigating the practices of particular people in particular places. We all are familiar with the cliche, especially in institutional settings, where we tell, or are told, "the way things get done around here." Part of what the cultural interpreter investigates is that "way," or those "ways," from the standpoint of those use them.

What is investigated, then, and not exclusively but fundamentally, is *the participant*

or native view. Such a view can be studied in a theoretically rigorous way on its own, for its own sake, and forms a central and essential (but not sufficient) component of ethnography. With such an end in view, primary data become verbally interpretable practices, with the analytic task focusing on the sense interlocutors make with them. What communicative resources do participants use to render their world meaningful, or mutually intelligible? As they speak, what social and cultural identities do they express? What do they say they are doing? Through what verbal means and meanings? With what feelings? Seeing through the opacity of situated communicative meanings, understanding the affective imagination of one's sometimes temporary, sometimes permanent compatriots, being able to symbolize and sense-make as is typically done, penetrating the surface to deeper symbolic significances, all become tests and goals of one's interpretive claims. Is this what they think/say they are up to? Does this go to what they take to be the heart of the matter? Coming to grips with their voice, as they intend it, is the goal (Pearce, 1989, pp. 171–178).

It is important to amplify one point: the cultural interpreter need not be constrained by, and thus would try to recognize, the common boundaries of participants' interpretations. The strived-for, "aha" effect, when the cultural interpretive "reading" is successful, might best be evidenced when informants respond in the general form, as I wrote in *Talking American:* "That's right! But I hadn't thought of it that way" (p. xiv). The interpretation both affirms the participants' sense of their world ("That's right") and throws it into sharper relief, producing some type of creative insight ("I hadn't thought of it that way"), with "that way" referring to the ethnographer's cultural interpretation.[2] The general interpretive goal might be characterized as a "creative evocativeness" (Carbaugh, 1990c) or as Philipsen (1987) might put it, a "creative affirmation." What permits the interpretive insight, in part, is treating a common practice as part of a larger cultural system of communication, of various means and meanings which are available, enabling a better sense of that one part, through an examination of its role within the participants' larger communal system of symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings.

In investigating participants' views as a system, questions inevitably arise about the nature of the "view" being investigated, and whether there is a view or multiple views. In other words, what is being interpreted in cultural interpretations of communication? The answer hinges ultimately, from the ethnographic view, on the cultural meaning systems which are invoked with particular expressive practices, and which are used to produce and interpret the actors and activities of social life. From other views, other orders are imposed. This invites reflection upon the terms in which, and the premises on which, one's theory of communication, culture, and/or society is formulated.[3]

For some, a particular sociological view of culture is used, as with most writers from the Marxist and neo-Marxist schools and most in the Cultural Studies movement.[4] This interpretive theory views communication practices as involving, at base, a struggle among social classes over meanings, with those in control of (material and/or nonmaterial) resources controlling communicative productions. This view inevitably requires an assumption of class-based conflict. Here, then, we have a sociologically based theory erected on the assumption of struggles among social classes, itself deriving from an unequal distribution of resources. Culture, therefore, is viewed through this sociological lens, as a lamination on this social process,

becoming a subsequent process of meaning-making, with meanings always being class based, relations among classes being marked by struggle, the struggle being resolved through structures which privilege the dominant class and oppress the rest, through a process which escapes the attention of "the rest," recreating forms of false consciousness, in which some interests are served over others, that is, the Gramscian "hegemony." This is culture, as proposed early on by Marx and later by Raymond Williams, from the standpoint of a sociological theory, conflicted, fragmented, and fraught with struggle. What is interpreted or created then, from this view, is a sociological view of culture which sees the positioning of classed persons within a conflicted society.

An alternative ethnographic starting point is guided by communication theory, and investigates cultural practices *sui generis,* through *the system of symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings* which participants employ, in situated ways, to render their world coherent and intelligible. The general approach is elaborated elsewhere (Schneider 1976; Geertz 1973; Turner 1980; Philipsen, 1987; Carbaugh 1988a, 1988c, 1990a,b,c) Here, I want to emphasize, for purposes of cultural interpretation, that the object of interpretation is the communication of culture, the interactional production of the sometimes paradoxical, sometimes contradictory, sometimes conflictual, polysemic, complex, multistranded *system* which alerts people to their common life. Whether metaphorized as web-like or octopoidal, for purposes of interpretation, culture, from this ethnographic view, is a socially interacted, and individually applied *system* of *symbols* (e.g., words, phrases, images, gestures, facial configurations, pauses, silences, etc.), *symbolic forms* (e.g., ceremonies, stories, trials, rituals, myths, social dramas), *and their meanings.* This system which coheres consensus and/or conflict can be studied *sui generis,* as something on its own, for its own sake.

I want to emphasize that when the system is conceptualized as a communication system, it is productive to think of it as something symbolically constituted, socially negotiated, and individually applied. As *symbolically constituted,* the communication practice, when employing the cultural system, has multiple possible radiants of meanings; it is "polysemic" and "multivocal" (Carbaugh, 1988c, pp. 180–182). Cultural messages, that is, can have multiple meanings. While these meanings are part of what needs to be discovered and described ethnographically, they might involve concerns regarding the information exchanged, with this saying something about the information itself, or about the setting, the general topic of discussion, person identities, social relations, institutions, or even about the means of communication itself, and so on. It is in this sense that the symbolic practice of culture is a communication of something with a penetrating significance, tapping the deeper sentiments of those present, going beyond the surface and routine expression to a meaning system which participants can and do render intelligible. With (parts of) such a system, and at some times on some occasions, participants *cohere* conflicting and disparate parts; that is, they employ socially efficacious communicative resources for addressing "ever-present conflicts between social groups" in meaningful ways (Carbaugh, 1988c, p. 23). As *socially negotiated,* the system, or more precisely parts of the system (e.g., particular symbols, or forms, and their meanings), can be subtly molded and shaped to meet the ongoing contingencies of social interaction. The outcome of such interactional management can of course become a source of

tension or of harmony. The cultural system, the system of sayables can, of course, achieve various social ends, but no preformulated end is, from the view advanced here, necessary as a starting point. As socially negotiated, the system may at any one time, by any one person, be contested, but does not require social contesting in all of its contexts. As Schneider (1976, p. 210) put it, "it is only on the assumption that there are primary meanings or absolute meanings that it is necessary to regard culture as a conflict-ridden system." Common meanings, to be sure, may be played out through contested forms and symbols, but such forms and symbols—if socially efficacious to some degree—are coherent within a larger cultural system. People—whether they approve each others' actions or not—have some sense of what they are, as they say, "up to," or, "up against." The systematic formulation of that sense yields the cultural system. Such a system does not require consensus of opinion, the absence of conflict, equal statuses, or harmony, and so on, although it may cohere them, as is demonstrated in the terms and tensions of some workers (Carbaugh, 1988b). As *individually applied,* one highlights individual practices as enactments of communicative resources which are themselves parts of a larger system. Thus, one can study individuals and their sayings, but one does so in order to understand the cultural system in which they play a constituent part. It is this larger system, or parts of it, which individuals employ, and use for social negotiations and symbolic constructions. And it is this larger system which gives individuals a deeper sense of what they are, what they do and feel. This is culture at work in communicative practices.

The system interpreted, the cultural system, then, in so far as it is demonstrated in concrete communication practices, is not so much a bland replication of uniformity, as it is an organization of diversity; not necessarily an approved consensus, but a system of collaborative coherence; not a mere mirroring of one view, but a productive portrait, a bricolage of common life. As Richard McKeon put it, "To be of one mind is not to be of one opinion" (1956, p. 99). Cultural meaning systems, if not individual applications, cohere paradox, conflict, contradiction, even chaos.

John Fiske has raised the question of whether my *Talking American* book, as ethnography, obscures class differences and conflicts which might be heard expressed in the spoken practices which the book interpreted. Given the position I have sketched above, this is obviously a point of disagreement between Fiske and myself.

Although various materials in the book could demonstrate my points, I will use the first empirical chapter of the book (chapter 2). In it, I discussed cultural constructions of the person, or self, which were used prominently by interlocutors to respond to ever-present conflicts between social groups" (p. 23). I worked through several instances in which speakers used the symbol, "individual," to say something about an important social issue. For example, when military policy was justified on the basis of differences in male-female physical strength, implying men are stronger than women, a speaker said, "some women are stronger than men," and was met with the reply, "some individuals are stronger than some individuals." Or when unemployment was being discussed in Black and White terms, an "expert guest" responded, "we are on the side of individuals who are trying to make it." Speakers thus responded to divisive social issues by employing the "individual" symbol, a symbolic resource about persons which was heard to be a common cultural denomi-

nator (i.e., in these scenes, it was not contested). The cultural interpretation shows how this symbol, as part of a cultural discourse on personhood including symbols of "rights, choice, self, and roles," is used to embrace and cohere various individual comments and diverse social classes. When using such a system, and within this communicative process, some Americans symbolize "the person . . . as 'an individual'. This symbol provides for—to follow Durkheim—the collective representation of *the* person. In public speech, it has a prescribed force making it a generally unquestioned premise of personhood. The symbol functions culturally as a partial constituent of American personhood, enabling the equivocal affirmation of separate humanness (each person is an individual) and common humanity (everyone is an individual). Socially, the symbol—along with the 'rights' is used prominently to accomplish tolerance of diversity, freedom (mainly of choice and speech), and equality. Through the combination of its prescribed force, its cultural and social functioning, the symbol supports and helps (re)produce exemplary acts of respect (of persons as individuals)" (p. 109). This, I claimed, was the foregrounded meaningfulness of such spoken activity, to those who produced it, and "everyone and/or only one" kind of talk (p. 39). Also, I diagrammed and discussed the paradox involved in this "cultural construction of individuality" (p. 32–33), as when individualized semantics (each is an individual) are foregrounded over the cultural forms which give them expression (we conform in speaking this way). I introduced the symbol as a potent response to "ever-present conflicts" (p. 23), and wrote further, "Note how the individual code makes an articulation of some groups' special interests problematical (e.g., Blacks, the unemployed, women). The social dynamics of racial issues or equal pay become quickly spoken as individual matters, of one and/or all, thereby speaking over the special circumstances of a group that is unlike others. Impatience wells up in the face of such social difference, motivating moments of symbolic identification and empathy through the code of the individual, and hiding matters of distinctive, perhaps deeply important, class differences" (p. 39). What seems particularly noteworthy with regard to this specific cultural communication practice is both how it—among other things—provides a cultural response to some social conflicts, and how people can simultaneously express through it uniqueness and commonality and in so doing identify one with all others. This is a rather important and remarkable accomplishment.

In his review, Fiske claims that the "model" I used does not "handle [issues of structural social conflict] convincingly. Its reduction of social difference to individual difference is politically reactionary because it constructs individuals as equal and not as members of differentially empowered, or disempowered, social groups" (p. 451). My responses, by now, should be clear. As discussed above, the interpretation foregrounds a local "model" of specific practices through an interpretive theory of the participant view, and thus through this lens, when the "individual" symbol is efficaciously employed, social difference is symbolized culturally through a code of individual difference (or alternatively, as the analysis of the paradox shows, "the individual" symbol creatively evokes a common belief about humanity). But here we are discussing the local theory or cultural pattern used by these participants, not the model of communication used to study it. Although a critic might dislike the cultural pattern and call it "politically reactionary," it is nonetheless used by these people—men, women, Blacks and Whites alike; it is important and appropriate to them, and thus is an important cultural practice to understand, which is the goal of the cultural interpreter.

Just because this part of the study took cultural practices of uniqueness, commonality and identification as its analytic focus, does not imply that ethnography and ethnographers explore only such sayings. There are of course other such concerns (for example, discourses of gender, ethnic and class) which raise issues about the nature of social relations and structures, institutions and power (e.g., Huspek & Kendall, 1991). Some ethnographic studies of conflicted communication and class differences conceptualize such phenomena processually, within the symbolic form of the social drama. The social drama form (often a complex one of multiple symbols and forms) and its various meanings is itself a part of the cultural system, a part of the communication of culture, but is not equal to it. Victor Turner developed this model, explicitly a conflict based model, with such conflicted moments in mind, and it has been used—as has the general approach advanced here—in various tribal (e.g., Turner, 1980) and industrial (e.g., Katriel, 1986) societies. Related work on culture contact and conflict in industrial societies has been done by authors such as Kenneth Liberman on Anglo-Aboriginal interaction in Australian courtrooms and classrooms, J. Keith Chick on "the interactional accomplishment of discrimination in South Africa," Thomas Kochman on Black and White communication styles, and Ronald Scollon and Suzanne Wong-Scollon on interethnic communication, among many others.[5] Such work is essential and fascinating. In a multi-cultural society, however, there are not only conflicted discourses among different social groups, but also integrative discourses which display, at some times on some occassions, common meanings among disparate people. These common meanings constitute the Bakhtinian sense of the "center" and are no less the province of the ethnographer. To notice and formulate such discourses, freeing them, the unquestioned and inscrutable, for scrutiny, was a main goal of *Talking American.*[6]

The general ethnographic perspective advanced here foregrounds interpretive claims which characterize participants' or native views of communication practices through their indigenous cultural symbol system. As such the perspective needs to be understood as distinct from, and to my mind complementary with, other schools of interpretation. One general problem for the ethnographer is the understanding of how common culture is communicated, with this being addressed through cultural interpretation, that is, through an investigative mode the main objective of which is to render participants' views of communication practices coherent and intelligible, through a system of symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings which are invoked in those practices. As such, the perspective provides one way to integrate cultural interpretation into communication inquiry, toward the goals of understanding communication practices *sui generis,* on their own terms, and as they are variously lived in various places.

NOTES

Donal Carbaugh is an associate professor of Communication and a faculty affiliate in American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst 01003.

[1]The main ideas alluded to here invoke a broader conceptual system which involves a distinction between descriptive, interpretive, explanatory and critical claims within ethnography (Carbaugh, 1990a), qualities of cultural practices and of cultural analysis (1988a), prominent cultural structures in communicative practices (Carbaugh, 1990c), and phases of communication theorizing within ethnography (Carbaugh & Hastings, n.d.). This work is informed by many others. See for examples the earlier articles in this journal by Bauman (1970), Philipsen (1975, 1976, 1986), and Huspek & Kendall (1991); Philipsen's (1987, 1989) papers; the chapters in a reader on the subject (Carbaugh, 1990b); the recent review by Leeds-Hurwitz (1990); and the bibliography of such studies (Philipsen and Carbaugh, 1986).

[2]Space prohibits discussing styles of writing ethnography here, thus I merely note that I see ethnographic

writing as a process of creative inscription about empirical patterns and processes, with the ethnographic report assuming the quality—as I wrote in *Talking American*—of a "productive portrait" rather than a "mere mirror" (pp. xiii–xiv).

[3]A crucial distinction is introduced here but space prohibits its development. It consists, essentially, in the relations among theories of communication, society, and culture, the nature and priority given to each. Resulting are various types of theories, for example, some making communication the fundamental source of explanation, with others making it vary upon other social axes. This leads some to view culture, or communication, through a sociological theory; others to view it through communication theory. The possibilities are of course varied, and often sources of confusion.

[4]All Cultural Studies scholars would, I believe, agree with some of the following, and some would agree with all of it, but inevitably some who so affiliate will disagree with some parts, if not the whole effort to so characterize. As much is inevitable given the nature of such statements.

[5]See especially the readings comprising unit two of (a recent reader on communication, culture, and intercultural contacts) Carbaugh, 1990b.

[6]Perhaps a brief summary of how the book has operated for some readers to scrutinize the typically inscrutable would demonstrate this effect in action. Within the United States, some students and teachers who have used the book have told me how it has helped them notice patterns they see/hear every day, and thus critically reflect upon them. Some other readers say it has helped them revise patterns they have lived which are personally distressing, or dysfunctional. A few readers, most notably two Native Americans and several Blacks, have found the book useful in distinguishing, in so many words, a broad common culture from one they find distinctive in their homes, neighborhoods, and (Indian) nations. Several recent sojourners to the United States have told me the book offers a way into—at least some prominent parts of—American culture, making it more critically accessible and intelligible to them. Others from various parts of Europe and Asia have reacted similarly. These reactions, I think, display how the book does not necessarily "endorse" the communication practices which it describes, but makes them more scrutable to those who produce and/or contact them, enabling various possible reactions from affirmation to resistance and change.

REFERENCES

Bauman, R. (1970). Aspects of 17th century Quaker rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56,* 67–74.

Carbaugh, D. (1988a). Comments on "culture" in communication inquiry. *Communication Reports, 1,* 38–41.

Carbaugh, D. (1988b). Cultural terms and tensions in the speech at a television station. *Western Journal of Speech Communication, 52,* 216–237.

Carbaugh, D. (1988c). *Talking American.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Carbaugh, D. (1990a). The critical voice in ethnography of communication research. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 23,* 261–282.

Carbaugh, D. (Ed.) (1990b). *Cultural Communication and Intercultural Contact.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Carbaugh, D. (1990c). Toward a perspective on cultural communication and intercultural contact. *Semiotica, 80,* 15–35.

Carbaugh, D. & S.O. Hastings. (n.d.). A role for communication theory in ethnography and cultural analysis. Unpublished manuscript. University of Massachusetts.

Fiske, J. (1990). Review of D. Carbaugh, *Talking American, Quarterly Journal of Speech, 76,* 450–451.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures.* New York: Basic Books.

Husepk, M. & K. Kendall. (1991). On withholding political voice: An analysis of the political vocabulary of a "nonpolitical" speech community. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 77,* 1–19.

Katriel, T. (1986). *Talking straight.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (1990). Culture and communication: A review essay. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 76,* 85–96.

McKeon, R. (1956). Communication, truth, and society. *Ethics, 67,* 89–99.

Pearce, W.B. (1989). *Communication and the human condition.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Philipsen, G. (1975). Speaking "like a man" in Teamsterville: Culture patterns of role enactment in an urban neighborhood. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 61,* 13–22.

Philipsen, G. (1976). Places for speaking in Teamsterville. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62,* 15–25.

Philipsen, G. (1986). Mayor Daley's council speech: A cultural analysis. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 72,* 247–260.

Philipsen, G. (1987). The prospect for cultural communication. In L. Kincaid (Ed.), *Communication theory from Eastern and Western perspectives* (pp. 245–254). New York: Academic Press.

Philipsen, G. (1989). An ethnographic approach to communication studies. In B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B. O'Keefe, & E. Wartella (Eds.), *Rethinking communication: Paradigm exemplars* (258–268). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Philipsen, G. and D. Carbaugh. (1985). A bibliography of fieldwork in the ethnography of communication. *Language in Society, 15,* 387–398.

Schneider, D. (1976). Notes toward a theory of culture. In K. Basso and H. Selby (Eds.) *Meaning in Anthropology,* (pp. 197–220). Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Turner, V. (1980). Social dramas and stories about them. *Critical Inquiry, 7,* 141–168.