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The Analysis of Communicative Events

In undertaking an ethnography of communication in a particular locale, the first task is to define at least tentatively the speech community to be studied, attempt to gain some understanding of its social organization and other salient aspects of the culture, and formulate possible hypotheses concerning the diverse ways these sociocultural phenomena might relate to patterns of communication (as discussed in chapters 2 and 3). It is crucial that the ethnographic description of other groups be approached not in terms of preconceived categories and processes, but with openness to discovery of the way native speakers perceive and structure their communicative experiences; in the case of ethnographers working in their own speech communities, the development of objectivity and relativity is essential, and at the same time difficult. Some early steps in description and analysis of patterns of communication include identifying recurrent events, recognizing their salient components, and discovering the relationship among components and between the event and other aspects of society.

The ultimate criterion for descriptive adequacy is whether someone not acquainted with the speech community might understand how to communicate appropriately in a particular situation; beyond that, we wish to know why those behaviors are more appropriate than alternative possibilities. Observed behavior is recognized as a manifestation of a deeper set of codes and rules, and a major goal of ethnography is the discovery and explication of the rules for contextually appropriate behavior in a community or group; in other words, accounting for what the individual needs to know to be a functional member of the community.

Relationship of Ethnographer and Speech Community

In part because anthropology until relatively recently has been concerned primarily with non-Western cultures, and has relegated the study of Western

cultures to sociology, psychology and the other social sciences, the techniques of ethnography were little applied in our own society except occasionally in caricature. It has been observed that this division of effort was not accidental, and that anthropology traditionally reflected Western ethnocentric distinctions between conquered colonial (or internal neo-colonial) groups and their conquerors. The outside observer, foreign to the society and unfamiliar with the culture, could innocently collect and report any information, confident that the group would allow indulgence for breaches of etiquette, and that protection would be provided by the fact that involvement in the society could be terminated at any point by returning home.

In recent decades awareness has grown that the researcher can develop a deeper understanding of the culture under study by adopting a functional role and becoming a participant. This may in fact be necessary at times if the lack of a defined status and role would cause problems of acceptance by the community. Some kind of rationale may be required for the observer's presence, particularly in studies within his or her own society. When the observer knows the rules of the culture, and the members of the community know that he or she knows the rules of the culture, they expect the observer to behave like a member of the society. Thus, they are likely to find it aberrant for observers to inquire about or record behavior which they are assumed to know, and little tolerance will be shown for violations of rules. There is considerable awkwardness, severe constraints are involved, and problems of ethics emerge. In addition, observers, taking for granted large aspects of the culture because they are already known "out of awareness," may find it difficult and less intellectually rewarding to attempt to discover and explicate the seemingly obvious, the "unmarked" case.

Nevertheless ethnographers, precisely because of this knowledge of a broad range of the world's cultures, are able to bring a comparative perspective to work even within their own society. And by keeping a mental distance from the objects of observation, and by treating subcultures such as that of the school or the factory as "exotic," they can maintain some of the detached objectivity for which anthropology is noted.

One of the advantages of studying one's own culture, and attempting to make explicit the systems of understanding which are implicit, is that ethnographers are able to use themselves as sources of information and interpretation. Chomsky's view of the native speaker of a language as knowing the grammar of the language opened the way to introspection by native speakers as an analytical procedure, and recognized that the vastness of this knowledge extended far beyond what had been revealed in most linguistic descriptions by non-native speakers. The extension of this perspective to the study of culture acknowledges the member of the society as the repository of cultural knowledge, and recognizes that the ethnographer who already possesses this knowledge can tap it introspectively to validate, enrich, and expedite the task of ethnographic description.

A further advantage to ethnographers working within their own culture is that some of the major questions regarding validity and reliability raised by the quantitatively oriented social sciences can be at least partially resolved. While there may be no one to gainsay claims concerning cultural practices in a remote New Guinea village, any description of activities in the observer's own society becomes essentially self-correcting, both through feedback from the community described and through reactions by readers who are themselves members of the same society.

At the same time, the emphasis in ethnographic work on an existential/phenomenological explication of cultural meaning further justifies the value of ethnographers working within their own culture. Combining observation and self-knowledge, the ethnographer can plumb the depths and explore the subtle interconnections of meaning in ways that the outsider could attain only with great difficulty, if at all. In the same way then, with the ethnographer able to function as both observer and informant, some of the problems of verification can be overcome, and a corrective to unbridled speculation provided.

When ethnographers choose to work in other cultures, the need for extensive background study of the community is critical, and a variety of field methods must be employed to minimize imposition of their own cultural categories and perceptions on recording the interpretation of another system. In some cases "outsiders" may notice behaviors that are not readily apparent to natives of the community, for whom they may be unconscious, but conversely no outsider can really understand the meaning of interaction of various types within the community without eliciting the intuitions of its members. Garfinkel notes:

The discovery of common culture consists of the discovery *from within* the society by social scientists of the existence of common sense knowledge of social structures. (1967: 76–7, emphasis his)

It is likely that only a researcher who shares, or comes to share, the intuitions of the speech community under study will be able to accurately describe the socially shared base which accounts in large part for the dynamics of communicative interaction.

A second issue is that of community access. Milroy provides good illustrations of how this may be negotiated in her discussion of the methodology used by Blom and Gumperz in Norway and of her own in Belfast:

I introduced myself initially in each community not in my formal capacity as a researcher, but as a "friend of a friend" . . . so that I acquired some of the rights as well as some of the obligations of an insider. (1987b: 66)

Obtaining access to minority communities which may have a history of exploitation poses ethical as well as practical problems. In the United States, most research on minority communities has traditionally been conducted by members of the majority group or by foreigners (e.g. the work of Madsen, Rubel, and Holtzman and Diaz-Guerrero on Mexican Americans, or Hannerz and Ogbu on African Americans). A member of the group under study who is also a researcher will already have personal contacts which should contribute to assuring acceptance, although taking such a role can result in the (sometimes justified) perception that a group member has "sold out" to the dominant establishment.

Often access can be negotiated to the benefit of all by including relevant feedback into the community in a form it may use for its own purposes. Positive examples can be found in the work of a number of anthropological linguists working with Indian groups in the United States. These include Ossie Werner (Northwestern University), whose research on Navajo anatomical terminology and their beliefs about the causes and cures of disease provided input to improvements in the delivery of health care, and William Leap (American University), whose research on Isletan Tiwa yielded a written form of the language and bilingual reading materials. These materials were developed in response to community fears that the language was in a state of decline, and to their desire to maintain it.

There are some data that should go unreported if they are likely to be damaging to individuals or the group. Whenever the subjects of research are human beings, there are ethical limits on scientific responsibility for completeness and objectivity which are not only justified but mandated. Furthermore, information which is given confidentially must be kept in confidence. The two linguists whose work with communities was cited above also provide positive examples of this dimension of professional integrity: some of the information about Navajo health beliefs and practices should be disseminated only within the Navajo community, and although the complete data base was reported by Werner, this portion will remain untranslated into English. Leap made no attempt even to elicit stories which had religious significance for the Tiwa (and thus were secret in nature), and his selection of content for the bilingual readers was submitted to a Parents' Advisory Board for approval prior to publication. Leap and Mesthrie (2000: 373-6) describe similar sensitivities in a bilingual program on the northern Ute reservation, where the community had strong beliefs that the Ute language could not and should not be written, as well as the procedures that were used with and within Tribal groups to achieve acceptable compromises which enhanced educational outcomes.

A third issue, partly contained within the second, is that of interviewer race or ethnicity. In the past, when studies were carried out in foreign environments or in minority communities by members of the majority

group, the myth of the observer as a detached, neutral figure obscured the social fact that whether a conscious participant or not, the observer was inescapably part of the social setting and affected the behavior of other participants, as well as being influenced and sometimes even manipulated by them. The lack of familiarity of researchers with the culture, the language, and the community often made them vulnerable to such influence, the more so since it was unperceived.

The effect of the observer's presence on other participants – the *observer's paradox*, so called because the observer cannot observe what would have happened if he or she had not been present – has been studied in certain situations, and appears to be variable. In a classic case, Labov (1970) discovered that replicating the interview procedures of Bereiter and Engelmann (1966), using a White interviewer with African American children in a threatening environment, produced a very low amount of verbalization compared with using an African American interviewer in a familiar (home) environment. However, Galvan and Smith (Smith 1973), both White, were successful in eliciting fluent speech from African American children in Texas schools, suggesting that ethnicity is not necessarily a critical inhibitor to communication. The bilingual situation is perhaps even more complex, at least as it affects the study of language behavior, but the effect on the study of other cultural features is less certain. We may be quite sure, however, that at the outset researchers must know the general framework, institutions, and values which guide cultural behavior in the community and be able to behave appropriately, both linguistically and culturally, within any given situation, if their participation is to be genuinely accepted. Similarly, researchers must be able to establish a common basis of shared understandings and rules for behavior if interviews or interactions are to be productive. (For discussion of network analysis theory and procedures in sociolinguistic research, see especially Milroy 1992; Milroy and Milroy 1997.)

Types of Data

While not all types of data are necessarily relevant for every study conducted, at least the following should be considered for any ethnographic research on communication:

1 Background information

Any attempt to understand communication patterns in a community must begin with data on the historical background of the community, including

settlement history, sources of population, history of contact with other groups, and notable events affecting language issues or ethnic relations. A general description is also generally relevant, including topographical features, location of important landmarks, population distribution and density, patterns of movement, sources and places of employment, patterns of religious affiliation, and enrollment in educational institutions. Published sources of information should be utilized as background preparation wherever they are available, and a search should be made of MA and PhD theses to avoid duplication of research effort. Relatively current data may be available from national, state, regional, or local levels of government, or through embassy representatives.

2 Material artifacts

Many of the physical objects which are present in a community are also relevant to understanding patterns of communication, including architecture, signs, and such instruments of communication as telephones, radios, books, television sets, computers, and drums. Data collection begins with observation and may include interviewing with such questions as "What is that used for?" and "What do you use to . . . ?" The classification and labeling of objects using ethnosemantic procedures is an early stage in discovering how a speech community organizes experience in relation to language.

3 Social organization

Relevant data may include a listing of community institutions, identities of leaders and office holders, and composition of the business and professional sectors, sources of power and influence, formal and informal organizations, ethnic and class relations, social stratification, and residential and association patterns. Information may be available in newspapers and official records of various types, and collected through systematic observation in a sample of settings and interviews conducted with a cross section of people in the community. A network analysis may also be conducted, determining which people interact with which others, in what role-relationships, and for what purposes. The procedure may also be used to identify subgroup boundaries within a heterogeneous community and discover their relative strength.

4 Legal information

Laws and court decisions which make reference to language are also relevant: e.g. what constitutes "slander," what "obscenity," and what is the nature

and value of “freedom of speech,” or how is it restricted. Laws may also prescribe language choice in official contexts, as those enacted in Quebec and Belgium, or as in bills passed in most US states intended to prohibit use of languages other than English for governmental functions. In communities where such information is formally codified, much is available in law books, court records, and on web sites, and in all communities it is accessible through interviews with participants in “legal” events of various kinds, and observation of their procedures and outcomes.

5 Artistic data

Literary sources (written or oral) may be valuable for the descriptions they contain, as well as for the attitudes and values about language they reveal. Additionally, the communicative patterns which occur in literature presumably embody some kind of normative idealization, and portray types of people (e.g. according to social class) in terms of stereotypic use of language. Relevant artistic data also include song lyrics, drama and other genres of verbal performance, and calligraphy.

6 Common knowledge

Assumptions which underlie the use and interpretation of language are difficult to identify when they are in the form of unstated presuppositions, but some of them surface after such formulas as “Everyone knows . . . ,” and “As they say . . . ,” or in the form of proverbs and aphorisms. These are “facts” for which evidence is not considered necessary, the “rules of thumb,” and the maxims which govern various kinds of communicative behavior. Some of the data can be elicited with questions about why something is said the way it is in a particular situation instead of in an alternative way, and even more by studying the formal and informal processes in children’s acquisition of communicative competence (discussed in chapter 7). Ethnoscience and ethnomethodology are most directly concerned with discovery of this type of data (discussed under Data Collection Procedures below).

7 Beliefs about language use

This type of data has long been of interest to ethnographers, and includes taboos and their consequences. Also included are beliefs about who or what is capable of speech, and who or what may be communicated with (e.g. God,

animals, plants, the dead). Closely related are data on attitudes and values with respect to language, including the positive or negative value assigned to volubility versus taciturnity.

8 Data on the linguistic code

Although it is a basic tenet in this field that a perspective which views language only as static units of lexicon, phonology, and grammar is totally inadequate, these do constitute a very important type of data within the broader domain. These, along with paralinguistic and nonverbal features in communication, are included in the model for the analysis of speech events as part of the message form component (discussed under Components of Communication below). Preparation to work within any speech community, particularly if the language used is not native to the ethnographer, should include study of existing dictionaries and grammars. Skills in ethnography of communication are probably best added to skills in linguistic analysis in its narrower sense in order to assure that this component is not neglected or misinterpreted.

Survey of Data Collection and Analytic Procedures

There is no single best method of collecting information on the patterns of language use within a speech community. Appropriate procedures depend on the relationship of the ethnographer and the speech community, the type of data being collected, and the particular situation in which fieldwork is being conducted. The essential defining characteristics of ethnographic field procedures are that they are designed to get around the recorders' biased perceptions, and that they are grounded in the investigation of communication in natural contexts.

Ethnographers should thus command a repertoire of field methods from which to select according to the occasion. Although an ethnographic approach is quite different from an experimental one, quantitative methods may prove useful (even essential) in some aspects of data collection, especially when variable features of language use are being explored. Quantitative methods are essentially techniques for measuring degree of consistency in behavior, and the amount and nature of variation under different circumstances. The ethnographer may profitably collaborate with the sociologist, psychologist, or sociolinguist interested in quantitative analysis, but if quantitative methods are to be used, they must first be developed and validated by qualitative procedures. Quantitative procedures may in turn serve to