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**Subject: ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION**

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**CHAPTER ONE: An Introduction to Ethnography of Communication**

Ethnography is a field of study which is concerned primarily with the description and analysis of culture and linguistics is a field concerned, among other things, with the description and analysis of language codes. In spite of long-standing awareness of the interrelationship of language and culture, the descriptive and analytic products of ethnographers and linguists traditionally failed to deal with this interrelationship. Even anthropological linguists and linguistic anthropologists until the 1960s typically gave little attention to the fact that the uses of language and speech in different societies have patterns of their own which are worthy of ethnographic description, comparable to – and intersecting with – patterns in social organization and other cultural domains. The realization of this omission led Dell Hymes to call for an approach which would deal with aspects of communication which were escaping both anthropology and linguistics.

With the publication of his essay “The ethnography of speaking” in 1962, Hymes launched a new synthesizing discipline which focuses on the patterning of communicative behavior as it constitutes one of the systems of culture, as it functions within the holistic context of culture, and as it relates to patterns in other component systems. The *ethnography of communication*, as the field has come to be known since the publication of a volume of the *American Anthropologist* with this title (Gumperz & Hymes 1964), has in its development drawn heavily upon (and mutually influenced) sociological concern with interactional analysis and role identity, the study of performance by anthropologically oriented folklorists, and the work of natural-language philosophers. In combining these various threads of interest and theoretical orientation, the ethnography of communication has become an emergent discipline, addressing a largely new order of information in the structuring of communicative behavior and its role in the conduct of social life.

As with any science, the ethnography of communication has two foci: particularistic and generalizing. On the one hand, it is directed at the description and understanding of communicative behavior in specific cultural settings, but it is also directed toward the formulation of concepts and theories upon which to build a global metatheory of human communication. Its basic approach does not involve a list of facts to be learned so much as questions to be asked, and means for finding out answers. In order to attain the goal of understanding both the particular and the general, a broad range of data from a large variety of communities is needed.

A major early contribution to the field included an outline of information to be collected in doing ethnographies of communication, by Dell Hymes, Joel Sherzer, Regna Darnell, and others (1967), and this served as a guide for the scope and organization of the first edition of this book in 1982. Other major contributors to the development of the field have included John Gumperz, Dan Slobin, Richard Bauman, Susan Philips, Susan Ervin-Tripp, Shirley Brice Heath, and Ben Blount. Hymes’s influence has been so pervasive that it is impossible to specifically credit each of the concepts and visions for which he was initially responsible, and which inform this book and the work of others in various ways.

**Scope and Focus**

The subject matter of the ethnography of communication is best illustrated by one of its most general questions: what does a speaker need to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community, and how does he or she learn to do so? Such knowledge, together with whatever skills are needed to make use of it, is *communicative competence*. The requisite knowledge includes not only rules for communication (both linguistic and sociolinguistic) and shared rules for interaction, but also the cultural rules and knowledge that are the basis for the context and content of communicative events and interaction processes. Each of these components will be further delineated in the chapters which follow.

The focus of the ethnography of communication is the *speech community*, the way communication within it is patterned and organized as systems of communicative events, and the ways in which these interact with all other systems of culture. A primary aim of this approach is to guide the collection and analysis of descriptive data about the ways in which social meaning is conveyed: “If we ask of any form of communication the simple question what is being communicated? the answer is: information from the social system” (Douglas 1971: 389). This makes the ethnography of communication a mode of inquiry which carries with it substantial content.

Among the basic products of this approach are ethnographic descriptions of ways in which speech and other channels of communication are used in diverse communities, ranging from tribal groups in Africa and the Amazon regions, to nomadic herdsmen, to highly industrialized peoples in Europe, Asia, and North America. The priority which the ethnography of communication places on modes and functions of language is a clear point of departure from the priorities announced for linguistics by Chomsky: “if we hope to understand human language and the psychological capacities on which it rests, we must first ask what it is, not how, or for what purpose it is used” (1968: 62).

Hymes repeatedly emphasizes that what language is cannot be separated from how and why it is used, and that considerations of use are often prerequisite to recognition and understanding of much of linguistic form. While recognizing the necessity to analyze the code itself and the cognitive processes of its speakers and hearers, the ethnography of communication takes language first and foremost as a socially situated cultural form, which is indeed constitutive of much of culture itself. To accept a lesser scope for linguistic description is to risk reducing it to triviality, and to deny any possibility of understanding how language lives in the minds and on the tongues of its users.

**Method**

Doing ethnography in another culture involves first and foremost field work, including observing, asking questions, participating in group activities, and testing the validity of one’s perceptions against the intuitions of natives. Research design must allow openness to categories and modes of thought and behavior which may not have been anticipated by the investigator. The ethnographer of communication cannot even presuppose what a speech community other than his own may consider to be “language,” or who or what may “speak” it: “language” for the Ojibwa includes thunder; dogs among the Navajo are said to understand Navajo; the Maori regard musical instruments as able to speak; and drums and shells are channels through which supernatural forces are believed to speak to members of the Afro-Cuban Lucumi religious cult.

Ethnography by no means requires investigating only “others”: one’s own speech community may be profitably studied as well. Here, however, discovering patterned behavior which operates largely unconsciously for the native investigator presents quite different problems for “objectivity.” One of the best means by which to gain understanding of one’s own “ways of speaking” is to compare and contrast these ways with others, a process that can reveal that many of the communicative practices assumed to be “natural” or “logical” are in fact as culturally unique and conventional as the language code itself. A valuable by-product which emerges from this process is an essential feature of all ethnography: a deeper understanding of cultural relativism.

Complete escape from subjectivity is never possible because of our very nature as cultural animals; however, the constraints and guidelines of the methodology are intended to minimize our perceptual and analytical biases. The tradition of participant-observation is still basic for all ethnography, but it may be augmented by a variety of other data collection and validation procedures depending on the focus of investigation and the relation of the investigator to the speech community being studied.

**Historical Background**

Ethnographic study has been at the core of anthropology virtually since its inception, both in Britain and America. The American tradition, begun by Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber, tended toward a somewhat static presentation of cultural patterns and artifacts which was sometimes criticized as the “trait list approach.” The British tradition, which came to be called “functionalist,” was developed along two rather different orientations by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski, both of which strongly influenced American anthropology. The British tradition, especially following Malinowski, was much concerned with the social and cultural “meaning” of actions, events, objects, and laws as they functioned within the immediate or larger cultural context.

North American anthropologists, beginning with Boas, were primarily concerned with preparing ethnographic descriptions of Native American cultures before they were destroyed or assimilated by European settlers. Even before Boas, however, the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) under John Wesley Powell had placed a priority on describing Native American languages and collecting texts, which still serve as a major source of data for comparative studies of languages on the North American continent. Few of the linguistic descriptions from this period go beyond a sketch of the phonological system and grammatical structures (as outlined in Powell 1877; 1880; Boas 1911) and a list of vocabulary items collected according to a schedule distributed by the BAE (e.g., see Powell 1880), but accompanying reports often include observations which are relevant to understanding patterns of communication. In his *Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages*, Powell clearly states his intent to relate the description of language to other aspects of culture:

It has been the effort of the author to connect the study of language with the other branches of anthropology, for a language is best understood when the habits, customs, institutions, philosophy – the subject-matter of thought embodied in the language – are best known. The student of language should be a student of the people who speak the language; and to this end the book has been prepared, with many hints and suggestions relating to other branches of anthropology. (1880: vi)

Occasionally, descriptions of traditional educational practices contained references to training in “speaking well,” as in this brief mention of sociolinguistic constraints imposed on girls of the Carrier Indian tribe of Canada: “The stone labret worn by the noble maiden was a perpetual reminder to her that she should speak slowly and with deliberation” ( Jenness 1929: 26). Most information on communication beyond the vocabulary lists and structural sketches of the language codes was limited to listings of kinship terms, reflecting social organization and role-relationships within the groups; ethnological dictionaries, indicating plants and animals in the environment and of importance to the culture; and accounts of language origins and attitudes toward language reflected in creation myths and other folkloristic texts.

The American tradition of descriptive linguistics in conjunction with anthropological fieldwork continued with such notable figures as Edward Sapir, and (in spite of the divergence of an “autonomous linguistics”) more recently in the work of such Amerindian language scholars as Floyd Lounsbury, Mary Haas, Carl Voegelin, Paul Friedrich, and Dell Hymes.

Ethnography underwent a period of decline within anthropology during the middle years of the last century as values began to favor more “scientific” studies of social structure and issue-oriented research. There was a resurgence of interest, however, deriving from Goodenough’s cognitive reformation of the concept of culture, and in the wave of growing disenchantment with behaviorism. Observed behavior was recognized as a manifestation of a deeper set of codes and rules, and the task of ethnography was seen as the discovery and explication of the rules for contextually appropriate behavior in a community or group; in other words, culture was conceived to be what the individual needs to know to be a functional member of the community.

Concurrent with this latter development in anthropology was the introduction of interactionist and cognitive orientations in sociology by Goffman and Cicourel, which focused attention on the processes by which members of a community negotiate relations, outcomes, and meanings, and construct new realities and meanings as they do so. Hymes reports that he and others who were advancing “a social approach to language” during this period were influenced by developments in European linguistics:

Some of us with interest in the Prague School saw its attention to a range of functions and factors (e.g. Jakobson 1960) as healthy and desirable. That was a stimulus to me, in any case, seeming to provide a basis in linguistics itself for the study of language as organized as a part of social life. (2000: 313)

The convergent interest in sociology and linguistics, and the description of language use in a social context, raised serious questions about the autonomy of linguistics and the “ideal speaker-hearer” in the “completely homogeneous speech-community” (Chomsky 1965: 3), central concepts in the dominant theoretical model of American linguistics during the 1960s. By the end of that decade, merely accounting for *what* can (and cannot) be said in a language, but not *when*, *where*, *by whom*, *to whom*, *in what manner*, and *under what particular social circumstances* it can (or cannot) be said, came to be considered inadequate as a goal for linguistics by many linguists, and by all identifying themselves as “sociolinguists.”

**Significance**

While the goals of ethnography are at least in the first instance descriptive, and information about diverse “ways of speaking” is a legitimate contribution to knowledge in its own right, the potential significance of the ethnography of communication goes far beyond a mere cataloging of facts about communicative behavior.

For anthropology, the ethnography of communication extends understandings of cultural systems to language, at the same time relating language to social organization, role-relationships, values and beliefs, and other shared patterns of knowledge and behavior which are transmitted from generation to generation in the process of socialization/enculturation. Further, it contributes to the study of cultural maintenance and change, including acculturation phenomena in contact situations, and may provide important clues to culture history.

For psycholinguistics, the ethnography of communication means that studies of language acquisition must now not only recognize the innate capacity of children to learn to speak, but must account for how particular ways of speaking are developed in particular societies in the process of social interaction. Experimental design can no longer presume that mothers are primary caregivers in all societies, for example, nor can a researcher assume that the presence of an observer (and a tape recorder) will distort data comparably in all settings among all groups. Any study of language pathologies outside of one’s own speech community must include culture-specific information on what is considered “normal” and “aberrant” performance within the other group. Claims about universal strategies and processes need to be tested against descriptive data from other cultures, and such cross-cultural research requires the openness and relativism of ethnographic methods.

For sociolinguistic research, which generally involves recording naturalistic speech in various contexts, the potential contribution of this perspective was noted by Gumperz:

Even after the material has been recorded, it is sometimes impossible to evaluate its social significance in the absence of ethnographic knowledge about social norms governing linguistic choice in the situation recorded. (1970: 9)

Again, the qualitative information which forms an essential part of ethnographies of communication should become an important prerequisite for sampling, data collection, and interpretation in quantitative studies. Experimental design which is based only on the researcher’s own cultural presuppositions has no necessary validity in a different speech community.

For the field of applied linguistics, one of the most significant contributions made by the ethnography of communication is the identification of what a second language learner must know in order to communicate appropriately in various contexts in that language, and what the sanctions may be for any violations or omissions. There are also important applications for contrasting whole communicative systems in cross-cultural interaction and translation, and for recognizing and analyzing communicative misunderstandings.

For theoretical linguistics, the ethnography of communication can make a significant contribution to the study of universals in language form and use, as well as to language-specific and comparative fields of description and analysis. Its approach and findings are essential for the formulation of a truly adequate theory of language and linguistic competence.

**Basic Terms, Concepts, and Issues**

1. **Speech Community**

**Defining Speech Community (Review of Related Literature)**

**1-** “ group of people who use the same system of speech-signals is a speech community. Obviously the value of language depend upon people’s using it in the same way…. A speech community is a group of people who interact by means of speech” **(Bloomfield, 1933: 29-42).**

**2-** “a social group which may be either monolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weaknesses in the lines of communication. Linguistic communities may consist of small groups bound together by face-to-face contact or may cover large regions, depending on the level of abstraction we wish to achieve” **(Gumperz, 1968: 381)**

**3-** "All people who use a given language or dialect” **Lyons (1970)**

**4-**"Participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage“. **Labov (1972)**

**5-** “ a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety **( Hymes, 1972: 54).**  
**6-** “ …..if speech communities are defined solely by their linguistic characteristics, we must acknowledge the inherent circularity of any such definition in that language itself is a communal possession. We must also acknowledge that using linguistic characteristics alone to determine what is or is not a speech community has proved so far to be quite impossible because people do not necessarily feel any such direct relationship between linguistic characteristics A, B, C, and so on, and speech community X. What we can be sure of is that speakers do use linguistic characteristics to achieve group identity with, and group differentiation from, other speakers, but they use other characteristics as well: social, cultural, political and ethnic, to name a few” **(Wardhaugh, 2006: 120).**

Since the focus of the ethnography of communication is typically on the speech community, and on the way communication is patterned and organized within that unit, clearly its definition is of central importance. Many definitions have been proposed (e.g. Hudson 1980: 25–30), including such criteria as shared language use (Lyons 1970), shared rules of speaking and interpretation of speech performance (Hymes 1972c), shared attitudes and values regarding language forms and use (Labov 1972), and shared sociocultural understandings and presuppositions with regard to speech (Sherzer 1975).

Linguists are generally in agreement that a speech community cannot be exactly equated with a group of people who speak the same language, for Spanish speakers in Texas and Argentina are members of different speech communities although they share a language code, and husbands and wives within some speech communities in the South Pacific use quite distinct languages in speaking to one another. Speakers of mutually unintelligible dialects of Chinese identify themselves as members of the same larger speech community (they do indeed share a written code, as well as many rules for appropriate use), while speakers of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese are not members of the same speech community although their languages are to some degree mutually intelligible. Questions arise in deciding if speakers of English from England and the United States (or Canada and Australia, or India and Nigeria) are members of the same speech community. How different must rules of speaking be to be significantly different? Are deaf signers and hearing interpreters members of the same speech community? Answers to such questions are based on history, politics, and group identification, rather than on purely linguistic factors. It is thus useful to distinguish between participating in a speech community and being a member of it; speaking the same language is sufficient (yet not necessary) for some degree of participation, but membership cannot be based on knowledge and skills alone.

All definitions of *community* used in the social sciences include the dimension of shared knowledge, possessions, or behaviors, derived from Latin *communitae* ‘held in common,’ just as the sociolinguistic criteria for speech community enumerated above all include the word ‘shared.’ A key question is whether our focus in initially defining communities for study should be on features of shared language form and use, shared geographical and political boundaries, shared contexts of interaction, shared attitudes and values regarding language forms, shared sociocultural understandings and presuppositions, or even shared physical characteristics (e.g., a particular skin color may be considered a requirement for membership in some communities, a hearing impairment for others). The essential criterion for “community” is that some significant dimension of experience be shared, and for “speech community” that the shared dimension be related to ways in which members of the group use, value, or interpret language.

While sociolinguistic research has often focused on the patterning of language practice within a single school, a neighborhood, a factory, or other limited segment of a population, an integrated ethnographic approach would require relating such subgroups to the social and cultural whole. There is no necessary expectation that a speech community will be linguistically homogeneous, nor that it will be a static entity which necessarily encompasses the same membership over time or situations – although degree of fluidity will depend on the nature of bounding features and attitudes concerning their permeability.

At any level of speech community selected for study, the societal functions of language will include the functions served by such bounding features, of *separating*, *unifying*, and *stratifying*. The interactional functions which are present will be dependent on the level of community studied, with a full complement of language functions and domains present only at the level defined as including a range of role opportunities. At this more inclusive level, a speech community need not share a single language, and indeed it will not where roles are differentially assigned to monolingual speakers of different languages in a single

multilingual society (e.g. speakers of Spanish and Guaranي in Paraguay, discussed in chapter 3).

An informal typology of speech communities as “soft-shelled” versus “hard-shelled” may be distinguished on the basis of the strength of the boundary that is maintained by language: the “hard-shelled” community has of course the stronger boundary, allowing minimal interaction between members and those outside, and providing maximum maintenance of language and culture.

Speech communities which primarily use one of the world languages are more likely to be “soft-shelled,” because it will be known as a second language by many others, and interaction across the boundary will be relatively easy in both directions. A speech community speaking a language with more limited distribution would more likely be “hard-shelled,” because relatively few outside the community learn to use it. Educated speakers learn a world language for interaction across the boundary, but this is unidirectional,

with outsiders still very restricted in their internal linguistic participation. The most extreme form of a “hard-shelled” community would be one like Mongolia, where members speak a language outsiders do not know,

yet few learn a world language for wider communication; another would be the Tewa-speaking San Juan pueblo in New Mexico, where outsiders are forbidden even to hear the language, and only a few insiders traditionally learn either English or Spanish.

Language often serves to maintain the separate identity of speech communities within larger communities, of which their speakers may also be members. Within the United States, for instance, Armenian continues to function in some areas as the language of home, religion, and social interaction among members of the group. Because the Armenians are bilingual and also speak English, they participate fully in the larger speech community, but because outsiders seldom learn Armenian, the language is a barrier which keeps others from participating in their internal social and religious events. A similar situation exists in Syria, where Armenians bilingual in their native language and Arabic participate in two speech communities; these remain separate entities because of the one-way boundary function the Armenian

language serves. In cases where individuals and groups belong to more than one speech community, it is useful to distinguish between primary and secondary membership.

On the other hand, there is no necessary reason for a speech community to be geographically contiguous. Armenians in California and Syria may be considered members of the same speech community even if they have little interaction with one another, and (especially with widespread access to telephones and e-mail) individuals and groups who are dispersed may maintain intensive networks of interaction. Largely because of the internet, “virtual” communities of interest have been established world-wide. Even with no face-to-face contact, patterned rules for communication have emerged and become codified.

Individuals, particularly in complex societies, may thus participate in a number of discrete or overlapping speech communities, just as they participate in a variety of social settings. Which one or ones a person orients himself or herself to at any moment – which set of rules he or she uses – is part of the strategy of communication. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to recognize that each member of a community has a repertoire of social identities, and each identity in a given context is associated with a number of appropriate verbal and nonverbal forms of expression. It is therefore essential to identify the social categories recognized in a community in order to determine how these are reflected linguistically, and how they define and constrain interpersonal interaction in communicative situations.

The use of the speech community as a basic social unit for study has been criticized by some because of its implicit acceptance of existing social/political boundaries and categories as legitimate entities. One alternative is a more complex model of “nested” speech communities reflecting expanding fields of individuals’ interactions and networks (Kerswill 1994; Santa Ana and Parodi 1998). Another is the *discourse community*, which is a flexible grouping of individuals who share rules for “discursive practice.” This construct (based on notions from Foucault, e.g. 1972)

creates a group of compelling unspoken historic rules, which in turn determine in a certain social, economic, geographic or linguistic area what can be said, how it can be expressed, who may speak, where, and under which dominant predictions. A discursive practice oversees the distribution of knowledge and arranges certain ways of speaking into a hierarchy. ( Lehtonen 2000: 41–2)

Yet another alternative is the *community of practice*, defined as “a group whose joint engagement in some activity or enterprise is sufficiently intensive to give rise over time to a repertoire of shared practices” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999: 185; see also Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999). This latter construct seems especially appropriate for the study of processes in the development of norms of interaction within dynamic groups, involving either enculturation or acculturation and sometimes lengthy periods of apprenticeship.

Of particular interest in relation to all of these constructs is how membership involves learning how to use language – the acquisition and extension of communicative competence.

1. **Communicative Competence**

Hymes (1966a) observed that speakers who could produce any and all of the grammatical sentences of a language (per Chomsky’s 1965 definition of *linguistic competence*) would be institutionalized if they indiscriminately went about trying to do so without consideration of the appropriate contexts of use. *Communicative competence* involves knowing not only the language code but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. Further, it involves the social and cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have which enables them to use and interpret linguistic forms. Hymes (1974, 1987) augmented Chomsky’s notion of linguistic competence (knowledge of systematic potential, or whether or not an utterance is a possible grammatical structure in a language) with knowledge of appropriateness (whether and to what extent something is suitable), occurrence (whether and to what extent something is done), and feasibility (whether and to what extent something is possible under particular circumstances). The concept of communicative competence (and its encompassing congener, social competence) is one of the most powerful organizing tools to emerge in the social sciences in recent years.

Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, to whom one may speak, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what nonverbal behaviors are appropriate in various contexts, what the routines for turn-taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, how to enforce discipline, and the like – in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative modalities in particular social settings.

Clear cross-cultural differences can and do produce conflicts or inhibit communication. For example, certain American Indian groups are accustomed to waiting several minutes in silence before responding to a question or taking a turn in conversation, while the native English speakers they may be talking to have very short time frames for responses or conversational turn-taking, and find long silences embarrassing. Conversely, Abrahams (1973) has pointed out that among African Americans conversations may involve several persons talking at the same time, a practice which would violate White middle-class rules of interaction. And as mentioned earlier, even such matters as voice level differ cross-culturally, and speaker intent may be misconstrued because of different expectation patterns for interpretation.

The concept of communicative competence must be embedded in the notion of cultural competence, or the total set of knowledge and skills which speakers bring into a situation. This view is consonant with a semiotic approach which defines culture as meaning, and views all ethnographers (not just ethnographers of communication) as dealing with symbols (e.g. Douglas 1970; Geertz 1973). The systems of culture are patterns of symbols, and language is only one of the symbolic systems in this network. Interpreting the meaning of linguistic behavior requires knowing the meaning in which it is embedded.

Ultimately all aspects of culture are relevant to communication, but those that have the most direct bearing on communicative forms and processes are the social and institutional structure, the values and attitudes held about language and ways of speaking, the network of conceptual categories which results from experiences, and the ways knowledge and skills (including language) are transmitted from one generation to the next and to new members of the group. Shared cultural knowledge is essential to explain the shared presuppositions and judgments of truth value which are the essential undergirdings of language structures, as well as of contextually appropriate usage and interpretation.

While referential meaning may be ascribed to many of the elements in the linguistic code in a static manner, situated meaning must be accounted for as an emergent and dynamic process. Interaction requires the perception, selection, and interpretation of salient features of the code used in actual communicative situations, integrating these with other cultural knowledge and skills, and implementing appropriate strategies for achieving communicative goals.

The phonology, grammar, and lexicon which are the target of traditional linguistic description constitute only a part of the elements in the code used for communication. Also included are the paralinguistic and nonverbal phenomena which have conventional meaning in each speech community, and knowledge of the full range of variants in all elements which are available for transmitting social, as well as referential, information. Ability to discriminate between those variants which serve as markers of social categories or carry other meaning and those which are insignificant, and knowledge of what the meaning of a variant is in a particular situation, are all components of communicative competence.

The verbal code may be transmitted on oral, written, or manual (signed) channels. The relative load carried on each channel depends on its functional distribution in a particular speech community, and thus they are of differential importance in the linguistic repertoire of any individual or society.

Full participation in a deaf speech community requires ability to interpret language on the manual channel but not the oral, for instance; a speech community with a primarily oral tradition may not require interpretation of writing; and a speech community which relegates much information flow to the written channel will require literacy skills for full participation. Thus, the traditional linguistic description which focuses only on the oral channel will be too narrow to account for communicative competence in most societies. Although it may cause some terminological confusion, references to *ways of speaking* and *ethnography of speaking* should be understood as usually including a much broader range of communicative behavior than merely speech.

The typical descriptive focus on oral production has tended to treat language as a unidirectional phenomenon. In considering the nature and scope of communicative competence, it is useful to distinguish between *receptive* and *productive* dimensions (Troike 1970); only shared receptive competence is necessary for successful communication. Knowledge of rules for appropriate communicative behavior entails understanding a wide range of language forms, for instance, but not necessarily the ability to produce them. Members of the same community may understand varieties of a language which differ according to the social class, region, sex, age, and occupation of the speaker, but only a few talented mimics will be able to

speak them all. In multilingual speech communities, members often share receptive competence in more than one language but vary greatly in their relative ability to speak one or the other.

The following outline summarizes the broad range of shared knowledge that is involved in appropriate communication. From the ethnographer’s perspective, this inventory also indicates the range of linguistic, interactional, and cultural phenomena which must ultimately be accounted for in an adequate description and explanation of communicative competence (see also Gumperz 1984; Hymes 1987; Duranti 1988).

**1 Linguistic knowledge**

**(a)** Verbal elements

**(b)** Nonverbal elements

**(c)** Patterns of elements in particular speech events

**(d)** Range of possible variants (in all elements and their organization)

**(e)** Meaning of variants in particular situations

**2 Interaction skills**

**(a)** Perception of salient features in communicative situations

**(b)** Selection and interpretation of forms appropriate to specific situations, roles, and relationships (rules for the use of speech)

**(c)** Discourse organization and processes

**(d)** Norms of interaction and interpretation

**(e)** Strategies for achieving goals

**3 Cultural knowledge**

**(a)** Social structure (status, power, speaking rights)

**(b)** Values and attitudes

**(c)** Cognitive maps/schemata

**(d)** Enculturation processes (transmission of knowledge and skills)

Communicative competence within the ethnography of communication usually refers to the communicative knowledge and skills shared by a speech community, but these (like all aspects of culture) reside variably in its individual members. The shared yet individual nature of competence reflects the nature of language itself, as expressed by von Humboldt (1836):

While languages are in the ambiguous sense of the word . . . creations of nations, they still remain personal and individual creations of individuals. This follows because they can be produced in each individual, yet only in such a manner that each individual assumes a priori the comprehension of all people and that all people, furthermore, satisfy such expectation.

Considering communicative competence at an individual level, we must additionally recognize that any one speaker is not infrequently a member of more than one speech community – often to different degrees. For individuals who are members of multiple speech communities, which one or ones they orient themselves to at any given moment – which set of social and communicative rules they use – is reflected not only in which segment of their linguistic knowledge they select, but which interaction skills they utilize, and which aspects of their cultural knowledge they activate. The competence of non-native speakers of a language usually differs significantly from the competence of native speakers; the specific content of what an individual needs to know and the skills he or she needs to have depend on the social context in which he or she is or will be using the language and the purposes he or she will have for doing so.

This further emphasizes why the notion of an “ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community” (Chomsky 1965: 3) is inadequate for ethnographic purposes. Also, multilingual speakers’ communicative competence includes knowledge of rules for the appropriate choice of language and for switching between languages, given a particular social context and communicative intent, as well as for the intralingual shifting among styles and registers which is common to the competence of all speakers. An extension has been made to “intercultural communicative competence,” which requires an additional level of metacompetence involving explicit awareness of differential usages and ability to adapt communicative strategies to a variety of cultural situations (Kim 1991). Liu (2001) further extends the construct to “adaptive cultural competence” as a goal for second language learners, which also encompasses social identity negotiation skills and culture sensitivity knowledge. He argues that such a higher level competence is needed for appropriate and effective social participation of non-native speakers who are in roles of international students or immigrées.

Accounting for the nature of communicative competence ultimately “requires going beyond a concern with Language (capital L) or a language. It requires a focus on the ways in which people do use language . . .” (Hymes 1993: 13). Problems arise when individual competence is judged in relation to a presumed “ideal” monolingual speech community, or assessedwith tests given in a limited subset of situations which do not represent the true range of an individual’s verbal ability (Hymes 1979b). The problems are particularly serious ones when such invalid judgments result in some form of social or economic discrimination against the individuals, such as unequal or inappropriate educational treatment or job placement. Awareness of the complex nature of communicative competence and the potential negative consequences of misjudgments is leading to major changes in procedures and instruments for language assessment, but no simple solutions are forthcoming (see Philips 1983a; Milroy 1987a; Byram 1997).

1. **The Competence of Incompetence**

Part of communicative competence is being able to sound appropriately “incompetent” in a language when the situation dictates. This may be done to signal deference when interacting with someone of high rank: e.g., in Burundi, lower ranking persons are expected to speak in a bumbling and hesitating manner to those of higher rank, but the same individuals speak fluently with peers or others of lower rank than they (Albert 1972). Similarly, members of a subordinate group in the community may adopt a “powerless speech style” with members of the dominant group, including women with men, ethnic minorities with majorities, and children with adults (Giles, Scherer, and Taylor 1979). Conversely, in Wolof “for the highest of the nobles incorrectness in certain aspects of speech is considered appropriate, since high-ranking persons are not supposed to be very skilled at speaking, at least in terms of superficial elaboration” (Irvine 1973: 40–1).

On some occasions, faking “incompetence” may have practical benefits. Actors or actresses may cultivate a “sexy” foreign accent to increase box office receipts, and applicants to at least one federally funded training project for which limited English proficiency was an entry criterion were caught cheating downward on the language test used for admission.

In a religious context, such as “speaking in tongues” among charismatic Christian groups, inarticulateness may be taken as evidence of divine inspiration, proof that the speaker is not in conscious control of what is being said (Douglas 1970: 109–10). Paradoxically, saying “I don’t know what to say” to someone who is bereaved may be interpreted as the most sincere expression of deep sympathy.

Speakers of a second language are often well advised not to try to sound too much like a native. A foreign accent will often allow as yet imperfectly learned rules of etiquette to be excused as such, while a speaker who has mastered the phonology of a language is assumed to have also mastered all other aspects of its use, and violations are more likely to be interpreted as rudeness or worse. Additional consequences of perfecting pronunciation in a second language may be suspicion or resentment from native speakers if they do not welcome new members, or feelings from the primary speech community that one is being disloyal to it.

Saville-Troike, M. (2003). *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.