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THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *This paper surveys the most important frameworks of analysis that could assist the ethnographer in detecting the functional mechanisms of such items as 'elaboration of identity' or 'change of identity'. The relationship between speech and social class is also discussed and a model of ethnographic research is provided. The main argument is that research in the ethnography of communication presupposes the acknowledgement of the inextricable link between language and the extra-linguistic, cultural context.*

Key words: *dialect, communication, ethnography of speech, register, style.*

1. Introduction

Communication is theoretically a neutral way of sharing knowledge or worldviews and of maintaining social relationships. Practically, some aspects of communication can vary according to geographical areas, social class, gender, age and level of education. This analysis terms communication any written, spoken, graphical or acoustic form of message transmission available in the world. A photograph, a letter, a conversation or a commercial manage to be successful instruments of communication but, at the same time, efficient means of proffering group-specific communication skills, stereotypical representations and linguistic automatisms. Speech communities that exist in the world testify to the perpetual functioning of this propagation mechanism.

Languages and speech communities do not exist in a vacuum. That is why a functional perspective in the ethnographic analysis of communication is mandatory: we have to see how language behaves functionally not formally within society. The form of language is the one that might suffer alterations in accordance with the manner in which functions change within daily communication.

Dell Hymes (in Hall 142) was the author who developed an approach to the study of language called *the ethnography of communication* whose central unit of analysis is the communicative event. The aim of the ethnography of communication, according to Hymes, is to detect patterns of language use that help members of particular socio-cultural groups to create and reflect their social world in particular contexts. Saville-Troike (126) defines ethnography of communication as the discovery and explication of the rules for contextually appropriate behaviour in a community or group or what the individual needs to know to be a functional member of the community.

This paper will combine theoretical considerations on the ethnography of communication with practical analyses of the manner in which group-specific discourses are constituted.

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2. The Ethnographic Study of Speech Use

Sherzer and Darnell refer to this subject of the ethnographic study of speech use from the perspective of cross-cultural variability of speech use. After analyzing several speech communities in contrast, the two authors came up with a set of relevant observations for any ethnographic research endeavour. First, Sherzer and Darnell (550) claim that a community and its members have *linguistic repertoires* which are formed of *linguistic varieties*. Varieties, the two authors further claim, are to be defined in terms of their functional role and in terms of historical provenience or structural features. Linguistic varieties function in the community and can fit into categories such as formal/informal, public/private, out-group/in-group.

These dichotomies are useful tools of analysis but, as the authors themselves admit, not the only possible ones in the ethnographic study of speech. Other functional dichotomies could be intellectual/non-intellectual, male/female, high class/ middle (low) class, criminal/law abiding. The last dichotomy refers to the fact that the language (speech) of criminals becomes a dialect with stereotyped expressions and language structures. We might think of the most famous example of the Italian mafia that almost developed a separate language, a new manner of communicating coded messages.

In point of message transmission Sherzer and Darnell (551) identify several functional coordinates that have to be analyzed in order to understand the various functional purposes that speech acts have in society. Thus, first and foremost, one has to identify the *topic* of the message, act or event. Secondly, the *channels* (spoken, written, sung, etc.) through which the message might be transmitted as well as the *key, tone* or *manner* in which the respective message is delivered have to be sought for.

The *participants, the setting* and the *norms of interaction* are also valuable aspects to be considered. But the element that reunites all the above mentioned coordinates is the *goal* of the speech event under consideration: functionally, *the goal* is a constructed instance towards which everything in the speech event converges. In other words, the topic, the channel, the key and all the other elements are but building bricks in the construction of the *goal.*

The goal is the 'situated meaning' that Garfinkel (302) found central to the ethnographic approach. 'Situated meaning' is constructed in specific contexts by actors who must actively interpret what they hear for it to make sense. In other words, the orderliness, rationality, accountability of everyday life is a 'contingent, ongoing accomplishment' and the basis of culture is not shared knowledge but shared rules of interpretation, a sort of commonsense knowledge of the world.

Meaning is consequently confined within the boundaries of commonsensical knowledge and that is why the researcher's interpretation of messages is possible as long as s/he shares the same cultural, commonsensical coordinates. And perhaps this is why researchers studying messages coming from different cultures than his/her own is confronted not only with language-generated difficulties but also with interpretation difficulties.

We might say that way in which commonsensical knowledge can be acquired by individuals is by means of the educational system (both family and school instruction) that has the role of turning individuals into 'social beings' that react, talk and interpret their life events or speech events in accordance with the

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above mentioned commonsensical coordinates.

This is not to say that individuals are passive recipients of knowledge. On the contrary, they find an active personal interpretation and a strong inner motivation for any meaning that they construct so as to be in accordance with their cultural coordinates.

In Garfinkel's (304) terms culture is not a 'replication of uniformity' but an 'organization of diversity'. In the light of the discussion above, the 'social' individual tries to circumscribe his diverse views to the coherent societal system of interpretation.

2.1. Socialization and Speech

Behavioural and linguistic patterns are not ingrained but socially transmitted practices that are acquired by individuals from early childhood and constantly improved and adapted to the ever changing social and cultural environments with which they have to cope throughout their lives. One of the means through which children and later adults acquire cultural and social knowledge is speech. Among others, according to Hudson (99), speech is an instrument of socialization - defined as the process whereby children are turned into competent members of their society.

Hudson argues that a great deal of culture is transmitted verbally and our 'cultural evolution' is only one of the benefits that verbal interaction brought about. Thus, any ethnographic study of speech should also concentrate on its abilities to lead to a shaping of behaviour and thought. The latter function is not to be taken as an inherent property of speech, however. Speech can be considered a tool, a trigger at most and, as Hudson (105) remarked, it is ideas that can shape language and not the other way around. Consequently, we can claim that the ethnographer's task is to look both at speech and beyond in order to discover the deep mechanisms of culture transmission.

2.2. Speech and Social Roles

Bernstein and Bloom and Gumperz put forth the hypothesis that different forms of social relation can generate quite different 'speech systems' or 'communication codes'. In the same line of argumentation, Bernstein (473) further argues that different speech systems or codes create different orders of relevance and relation for their speakers and that is why the experience of the speaker may suffer transformations by what is made significant by different speech systems. For instance, when children learn speech or rather specific codes regulating their verbal acts, they also learn the requirements of their social structure. Consequently, the experience of the child is transformed by the learning generated by his/her seemingly voluntary acts of speech. In other words, social structure becomes a substratum of the child's use of speech and thus every time he/she speaks or listens, the social structure in enforced and his/her social identity is permanently shaped.

According to Bernstein (474) individuals learn their social roles by means of communication. A social role is defined as '*a complex of coding activity controlling both the creation and organization of specific meanings and the conditions for their transmission and reception*.' Due to the above mentioned controlling function, children who have access to different speech systems or codes by virtue of their family's class position, may display quite different social and intellectual orientations despite the fact that their actual potential may be identical to that of children pertaining to other (sometimes presumably inferior) social classes.

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3. Verbal Transmission of Social Class Codes

Bernstein (472) argues that social class may be carried not genetically but by means of a communication code promoted by the social class itself, a code which can emphasize a communal and positional form of social control. In the case of schoolchildren, it may happen that, when the already acquired communication code is not in accordance with the orders of learning and relevance pertaining to the school, two situations may arise.

One would be that the child becomes sensitive to the orders of relevance and learning provided by the school and consequently give up his/her social-class generated communication code, a phenomenon which is called *change of social identity*. The other presupposes that the child is not sensitive to the communication system at school and his/her school experience becomes one of symbolic and social change. This second phenomenon is called *elaboration of identity*.

Bernstein provides an interesting example of this phenomenon: in referring to working-class children, he argues that there might be a discontinuity between the communication system of the school and that of the community to which the respective child pertains.

The case of Romanian children from rural areas could support Bernstein's claim in the sense that the respective children might sometimes be confronted with entirely different communicational codes: that of the school and of their family. This difference is enhanced when children go to school in neighbouring cities and are forced either to adapt and to adopt the communicational code of the school or to become a social outcast among the other children. Rarely do we encounter the phenomenon of *elaboration of identity* because especially children from working-class families not often have the power to impose their personal social-class communication systems. Most often we encounter the *change of social identity* process that may happen even unconsciously without the children's conscious and responsible decision on what to part with and what to adopt.

3.1. Social Class Scales

The most difficult endeavour of the ethnographer is to 'place' individuals in the right social class. In their support, several more or less complex scales of social-class membership have been devised. Wardhaugh (145, 146) presents a few of these scales which take into account factors such as occupation, education, housing and income.

An *occupational scale* may divide people into major professionals and executives of large businesses, lesser professionals and executives of medium-sized businesses, semi-professionals and owners of small businesses, skilled workers, semi-skilled workers and unskilled workers. An *educational scale* may consist of the following categories: graduate or professional education, college or university degree, attendance at college or university but no degree, high school graduation, some high school education and less than seven years of formal education.

Certainly, an ethnographic study of speech might take into account these categories as well as others that are relevant for the research. These criteria and others can be used to distinguish social classes. Trudgill (in Wardhaugh 147) makes such a classification and distinguishes five social classes: middle middle class (MMC), lower middle class (LMC), upper working class (UWC),

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middle working class (MWC) and lower working class.

The informants, adults and children, that Trudgill interviewed were classified taking into account occupation, education, income, type of housing, locality and father's occupation. His lower working class is, for instance, defined as those who use certain linguistic features (e.g. *he go*) more than 80 percent of the time and so on. This classification is very complex but, depending on the type of research, the ethnographer can make and use a more schematic categorisation.

4. Regional Variation

Social class is not the only factor according to which communication in general and speech in particular may vary. Regional differences are one of the most exploited areas of ethnographic research of communication on account of their being so complex with respect to the number of communicative instantiations of language called *dialects.*

Wardhaugh (133) distinguishes between *regional dialects* and *social dialects* of a language. The former marks off the residents of a particular geographical area whereas the latter is a variety associated with a particular social class or group, differentiating that class or group from others. An instance of social dialects related to social class has already been discussed.

Dialect geography is one of the most important research areas in the ethnography of communication. It may be said to detect the functional variations of languages that differentiate internally as speakers distance themselves from one another over time and space. This change, Wardhaugh (134) claims, leads to the formation of dialects of the languages. It can also happen that, in time, dialects become languages (Latin became French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian and so on)

Ethnographers drew maps which were included in *dialect atlases*. These dialect geographers try to delimit the boundaries (*isogloss*) of a particular linguistic feature. As it has been discovered, the dialect boundary coincides with geographical or political factors such as the boundary of an old principality or country, a mountain ridge or a river. As Suzanne Romaine (2) claims, if regional dialects have to do with geographical boundaries such as the ones mentioned above, social dialects have to do with boundaries of a social nature (e.g. between different social class groups). Thus, the difference between the social and regional dialects is that the former say who we are and the latter where we come from.

Apart from regional and social dialects, Romaine (19, 20) speaks about two other varieties referred to by sociolinguists as *register* and *style*. Register can be defined as the specialized communication pattern of a domain of activity or profession and is concerned with variation in language conditioned by uses and not by users. Different registers can be distinguished by identifying either special vocabulary or special meanings given to ordinary words in a particular professional context. Hudson (48,49) defines register as 'varieties according to use' in contrast with dialects which are 'varieties according to user'. In other words one's dialect shows who you *are* while one's register indicates what you are *doing.*

Style is related to register and it can range from formal to informal depending on social context, relationship of the participants, social class, sex, age, physical environment and topic. Romaine (21) illustrates stylistic variation in vocabulary by providing such examples as 'The teacher distributed the new books' versus 'The teacher gave out the new books'. Stylistic differences can occur at the level

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of syntax as, for example, an increased use of the passive voice in formal speech (in English): 'The meeting was cancelled by the president' versus 'The president called off the meeting'. In pronunciation we can encounter such stylistic differences between colloquial pronunciations 'readin' or 'singin' and more formal ones 'reading' and 'singing'.

Wardhaugh (141) identifies the basic conceptual tool in the analysis of style as being the *linguistic variable*, a linguistic item which has identifiable variants. For instance, using one of the examples above, 'reading' can be pronounced either as 'reading' or as 'readin' therefore it is the final sound in this word that can be called the linguistic variable (ng) having two variants [ŋ] in 'singing' and [n] in 'singin'. But linguistic variables need not occur only at the end of words. Different degrees of nasalization of vowels or *r*-less pronunciation can constitute linguistic variables as well. An example of *r*-less pronunciation as linguistic variable can be seen in words like *farm* and *far*. In this case, the linguistic variable is (r) and its two variants are [r] and Ø.

The ethnography of communication should seriously take into account such variations of style because they can be an indication of class or group membership. Also, style variations could, in some cases, indicate the geographical area or the age-group of the respondents and thus offer additional information about the respondents' motivation in choosing one particular form over the other.

5. A Model of Research

Perhaps the most efficient model of research, called the SPEAKING model, was put forth by Hymes (in Hall 143) who aimed at finding a way to describe systematically the links between language form and context in a communicative event. The purpose of this model is to connect linguistic forms to cultural practices and to discover what ideologies about the world may be hidden behind the practices of individuals**.** Each letter of the SPEAKING model represents one component of the communicative event:

- **S**ituation – physical and temporal setting and scene as well as its cultural definition. The situation can determine the topic, the verbal behaviour and expectations of the participants according to the manner in which they interpret the respective situation.
- **P**articipants – their identities in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, social status, etc. and their roles, relationships and responsibilities as participants in the event. In point of roles, the speech event could have the speaker and listener, writer and reader or in more general terms addresser and addressee, performer (emitter) and receiver. Hymes (in Stern 222) remarked that some speech acts such as the monologue, thinking aloud or prayers are not dyadic as they do not include an addressee. Speech events could also be triadic involving a third participant, hearer or audience.
- **E**nds – (expected) outcomes of the event, group and individual participant goals
- **A**cts – form, content and sequential arrangement of the speech acts that constitute the event.
- **K**ey (tone) – humourous, serious, playful, solemn, ironic, formal and informal
- **I**nstrumentalities – tools that are used in the construction of the speech event: code (language or language variety) and channel (vocal or non-vocal e.g. oral – written, verbal or non-verbal means e.g. prosodic features vs. body movements).
- **N**orms – of interaction and interpretation of language behaviour including turn-taking patterns

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▪ **G**enre – generically different speech acts such as storytelling, gossiping, joking, lecturing, interviewing, poem, myth, tale proverb, riddle, curse, prayer, oration, commercial, form, letter, editorial, etc.

(adapted from Hall 143 and Stern 222,223)

Obviously, this is a very comprehensive model that could have a practical application in research conducted on the ethnography of communication. Perhaps some of these aspects represented guidelines for researchers even before the issuing of this model but what is to be acknowledged is that it covers a wide range of components which are inextricably connected to the speech event and which could add valuable information about the purpose, function and nature of the message that is being transmitted.

6. A Functional Classification of Speech Acts

Any utterance which is taken in its context may fulfil more than one function in a given situation and one of the aims of ethnographic research on communication is precisely that of detecting the functions of speech in its social context. Stern (223) makes a classification of speech acts according to the possible functions that they may have within communication. Thus, from a functional point of view, speech acts can serve to *express* the speaker's personal state of mind or attitude. In this category, events such as exclamations, a child's cry, grunts or sighs could enter. Robinson (in Stern 225) claimed that speech acts have the function of marking the emotional state, personality and social identity of the speaker.

Another function of speech acts, the *interractional* function, consists in bringing the participants in contact to each other. This is a key function in establishing role relationships and in regulating encounters but also in opening up and maintaining social functions. Spolsky (3) provides the relevant example of a mother speaking to her child, the function of their talk being that of nurturing the social bond between them. When two friends are talking, much of their conversation functions to express and refine their mutual companionship.

The *referential* or *representational* function of language refers to the adaptation of speech to the contextual situation of the communication event. In other words, it refers to relating language to the non-linguistic context of the speech event.

The *instrumental* use of language refers to using speech with the purpose of making the recipient do something. Events such as requesting, commanding and urging can be said to have an instrumental function but also instructing and teaching are types of communicative behaviour intended to determine the addressee to do something, in this case to learn.

The *heuristic* function (Halliday and Robinson in Stern 225) refers to the use of language in enquiry or questioning. If the *expressive* function designates the use of language for its own sake, to give pleasure (imaginatively or aesthetically) the *metalingual* function (Jakobson and Robinson in Stern 225) refers to the use of language to speak about language. In this category we can include explanations and comments about speech acts such as 'I repeat', 'I must emphasize', 'What does this word mean?'.

The ethnography of communication benefits from such a functional classification which can furnish valuable data on the type of communication event in which participants are involved. Also, we might say that there are functions of speech events that indicate different degrees of education or formal instruction such as the expressive function which is not generally encountered within communicative events.

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7. Conclusion

This paper has dealt with various theories and tools of analysis that the ethnography of communication uses. It is clear, judging from the various theoretical frameworks of analysis that exist, that the ethnography of speech is a science that can assist the researcher in finding valuable information on the social-linguistic behaviour of people within the speech community. It is important, in any ethnographic study, to adopt a functional approach to speech events as it is only within their functional contexts that communicative events can provide a motivation for the linguistic choices that speakers make.

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