

## **II. Dell Hymes**

**1962 ----1974**

## A socially constituted linguistics

A similar connection between language and culture can be found in the work of Dell Hymes (1962, 1964, 1971, 1972a, b, 1974), another linguistic anthropologist.

**Hymes developed a conceptualization of language as context-embedded social action.**

According to Noam Chomsky's (1957, 1965) theory of language.

In keeping with a formalist perspective, Chomsky conceptualised language as **a fixed, universal property of the human mind containing internalised sets of principles from which language-specific grammatical rules could be derived, and thus describable in context-free, invariant terms.**

Hymes regarded this view **of language as too restrictive** in that it did not, in fact **could not, account for the social knowledge we rely on to produce and interpret utterances appropriate to the particular contexts in which they occur.**

He noted, **'it is not enough for the child to be able to produce any grammatical utterance. It would have to remain speechless if it could not decide which grammatical utterance here and now, if it could not connect utterances to their contexts of use'** .

**It is this social knowledge, Hymes argued, that shapes and gives meaning to linguistic forms. Because involvement in the communicative activities of our everyday lives is usually with others who share our expectations, these links are often difficult to see.**

However, although it may be difficult to perceive their vitality, they cannot be considered insignificant to the accomplishment of our everyday lives.

Thus, Hymes called for .....a more adequate theory of language that could account for the sociocultural knowledge that we draw on when using our linguistic resources so that they are considered structurally sound, referentially accurate and contextually appropriate within the different groups and communities to which we belong.

## **Socially constituted linguistics**

The phrase '**socially constituted**' is intended to express the view that **social function gives form to the ways in which linguistic features are encountered in actual life.**

This being so, an adequate approach must begin by identifying social functions, and discovering the ways in which linguistic features are selected and grouped together to serve them.

Hymes (1974)



## A socially constituted approach to the study of language and culture

Arguing for a **socially constituted linguistics** in which **social function is** treated as the source from which linguistic features are formed, Hymes developed an approach to the study of language he called the **ethnography of speaking**.

**In contrast to more formal descriptions of language as inherently** coherent systems, the focus of Hymes's approach is on capturing the conventional patterns of language used by members of particular sociocultural groups as they participate in their everyday communicative activities, with the goal of such research being not to seek 'the replication of uniformity, but the organization of diversity' (Hornberger, 2009).

A great deal of research, particularly in the fields of linguistic anthropology, communication, and education, has used this approach to investigate a wide range of communicative events and activities of many different groups and communities.

The conceptual base of an ethnography of speaking  
Now it is desirable . . . to take as a working  
framework:

1. the speech of a group constitutes a system;
2. speech and language vary cross-culturally in function;
3. the speech activity of a community is the primary object of attention. A descriptive grammar deals with this speech activity in one frame of reference, an ethnography of speaking in another. So (what amounts to a corollary, 3b), the latter must in fact include the former.

**Hymes (1962)**