

# Ethnography of speaking

Hymes proposed what is called **ethnography of speaking**

**What?** A **conceptual framework** and a method for conducting language study.

**Why?** Presuming a systematic **link between language use and context**.

This approach considers the communicative activity, or what Hymes termed the **communicative event, a central unit of analysis**

## Analytic attention is given to describing

- **the components** of communicative events and
- **the relations among them that participants** make use of to engage in and make **sense of their social worlds and,**
- in turn, **to link their use** to the larger **social, cultural, political and other institutional forces** giving shape to them.

More recent formulations of this approach to the study of language refer to it as **ethnography of communication to capture a more** encompassing understanding of the **variety of resources**, in addition to **language**, that is used in communication.



Literacy activities of various groups and communities have also been the subject of ethnographies of communication.

- Ahearn (2000), for example, studied the literacy practices of young Nepali women, focusing in particular on their use of love letters in courtship.
- Taking more of a wide-angle ethnographic approach, McCarty and Watahomigie (1998) studied both home and school literacy activities in American Indian and Alaskan native communities.
- Barton and Hamilton (1998) explored the activities constituted in the everyday lives of a group of adults in England.

- Findings from these and other studies have shown that literacy activities do indeed vary, in some cases considerably, from community to community.
- As these groups differ – and as the social identities of the readers and writers differ within the groups – so does the value that is placed on literacy activities and the communicative conventions used to engage in them.

The differences in literacy practices notwithstanding, the principal assumption of literacy underlying the various strands of literacy studies remains the same.

Literacy is defined not as 'a technology made up of a set of transferable cognitive skills, but [as] a constellation of practices', each made up of particular arrangements of skills and ways of reading and writing that are tied to their contexts of use.

. Likewise, the ethnographies share the goal of making visible the linguistic resources and communicative plans shared by group members and used to engage in their socio-culturally important communicative activities.

In addition to adding to our knowledge of cultural groups, studies taking an ethnography of communication approach to the study of language and culture have contributed a great deal to current educational practices.

# The recent turn in studies of communicative activities

In the past decade or so, applied linguistic studies of communicative events, particularly those realised through **face-to-face interaction**, have moved beyond **general descriptions** of the linguistic resources needed to engage in them to **more detailed descriptions** that show the **moment-to-moment interactional coordination** by which the communicative context is created.



This move has come about in part by the incorporation of methods for analysing conversation developed by the discipline of **conversation analysis (CA)**.

CA began in the field of **sociology** over forty years ago as an offshoot of **ethnomethodology**.

**An approach to the study of social life that considers the nature and source of social order to be grounded in real-world activity rather than regulated by universal standards of rationality.**

## Social Order

A local achievement, mutually produced by participants as they engage in activity with each other. Asserting a fundamental role for interaction as **'the primordial site of human sociality'** .

CA takes as its main concern **the study of talk-in interaction**, and more particularly, **'the analysis of competence which underlies ordinary social activities'** .

It is sufficient to note that findings from C A inspired studies have been useful in revealing the multitude of interactional methods such as turn-taking patterns and repair strategies that we have at our disposal for sense-making in our communicative activities.

In addition to drawing out the shared understandings that members rely on to make sense of each other's actions in talk-in-interaction activities, interest has developed in uncovering the *variability of resource use*.

**A criticism of early ethnographies of communication noted that ethnographic descriptions of communicative events often gave the impression that individual members' participation was always consensual, always orderly..**



Assuming a more dynamic understanding of community and language use, more recent studies have examined how individual members use the resources of their communicative activities to challenge the *status quo* or to reinforce particular ideologies

In terms of challenging existing conditions of language use, Hall's study (1993c) revealed how one Dominican woman was able to manipulate the conventional opening to the activity of gossiping as practised among her peers in such a way as to positively transform the nature of her involvement in the activity.

Typically, the opening of the gossiping event was signalled with the utterance 'tengo una bomba' (I have a bomb), the purpose of which was to inform the others that a story about the scandalous behaviour of another was about to be told. When this particular woman used it, however, what often followed was not a story about someone's impropriety, but a humorous anecdote in which she was the central figure.

Her unconventional use of the utterance to take the stage, so to speak, generated a great deal of humour among the other participants, and thus helped to raise her status within the group.

At the same time, it solidified her identity as a knowledgeable insider to her peers. In terms of reinforcing ideologies, the study by Blommaert *et al.* (2006) of three Belgian classrooms for newly settled immigrants revealed how teachers' instructional activities served to disqualify rather than to capitalise on students' uses of linguistic and literary resources that the teachers perceived to be non-standard.

Also included in this strand of ethnographic research are studies of the multimodal literacy practices engendered by the continuing expansion of information and communication technologies. Of particular interest are the skills and strategies by which individuals use these technologies to make sense of and participate in their communities both within and across geographical boundaries.



The study by Lam and Rosario-Ramos (2009) is one such example. They examined how teenaged immigrants in the United States used digital media to engage in social networking and to design and share information on local, national, and transnational events with peers and others living in their countries of origin.

They found that these digitally based, multilingual literacy practices situated the youths in a 'transnational circuit of news and ideas' that exposed them to narratives, experiences, values, and expectations from different social communities.

As for literacy practices, the term **New Literacies Studies** has been coined to refer to studies that take a more critical stance towards practices constituted not only in educational settings but also in social and professional groups and communities outside of schools across a range of geographical contexts.

The studies go beyond Hymes's basic ethnographic approach in that they seek to make visible the power relations embedded in and across the various practices, by asking ' "whose literacies" are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant' .