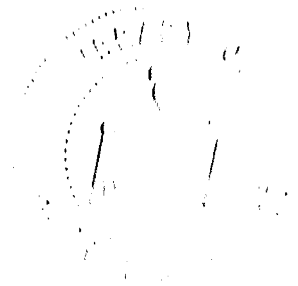
FOUNDATIONS in SOCIOLINGUISTICS



An Ethnographic Approach

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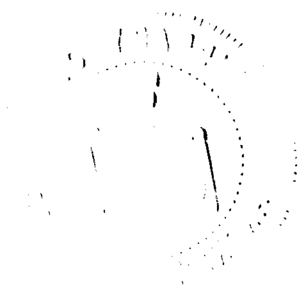

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In memory of

Edward Sapir

Chapter 1

Toward Ethnographies of Communication

The term "ethnography of communication" is intended to indicate the necessary scope, and to encourage the doing, of studies ethnographic in basis, and communicative in the range and kind of patterned complexity with which they deal.[1] That is, the term implies two characteristics that an adequate approach to language must have.

As to scope: one cannot simply take separate results from linguistics, psychology, sociology, ethnology, as given, and seek to correlate them, however partially useful such work may be, if one is to have a theory of language (not just a theory of grammar). One needs fresh kinds of data, one needs to investigate directly the use of language in contexts of situation, so as to discern patterns proper to speech activity, patterns that escape separate studies of

1. This chapter is based upon "Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication," in *The Ethnography of Communication*, ed. by John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1964), pp. 1–34, issued as Part 2 of the *American Anthropologist* 66(6) (December). It comprises mainly sections VI and VII of that essay. To Susan Ervin-Tripp, John Gumperz, Michael Halliday, Sydney Lamb, Sheldon Sacks, and Dan Slobin, I am indebted for warm discussions of language and its social study; to Bob Scholte and Erving Goffman for pointed argument about the notion of communication; and to Harold C. Conklin, Charles Frake, Ward Goodenough, Floyd Lounsbury, and William C. Sturtevant, for discussion through several years of the nature of ethnography. To all much thanks and no blame.

grammar, of personality, of social structure, religion, and the like, each abstracting from the patterning of speech activity into some other frame of reference.

As to basis: one cannot take linguistic form, a given code, or even speech itself, as a limiting frame of reference. One must take as context a community, or network of persons, investigating its communicative activities as a whole, so that any use of channel and code takes its place as part of the resources upon which the members draw.

It is not that linguistics does not have a vital role. Analyzed linguistic materials are indispensable, and the logic of linguistic methodology is an influence in the ethnographic perspective. It is rather that it is not linguistics, but ethnography, not language, but communication, which must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be assessed. The boundaries of the community within which communication is possible; the boundaries of the situations within which communication occurs; the means and purposes and patterns of selection, their structure and hierarchy—all elements that constitute the communicative economy of a group, are conditioned, to be sure, by properties of the linguistic codes within the group, but are not controlled by them. The same linguistic means may be made to serve various ends; the same communicative ends may be served, linguistically, by various means. Facets of the cultural values and beliefs, social institutions and forms, roles and personalities, history and ecology of a community may have to be examined in their bearing on communicative events and patterns (just as any aspect of a community's life may come to bear selectively on the study of kinship, sex, or role conflict).

It will be found that much that has impinged upon linguistics as variation and deviation has an organization of its own. What seem variation and deviation from the standpoint of a linguist's analysis may emerge as structure and pattern from the standpoint of the communicative economy of the group among whom the analyzed form of speech exists. The structures and patterns that emerge will force reconsideration, moreover, of the analysis of linguistic codes themselves. Just as elements and relations of phonology appear partly in a new light when viewed from the organization of grammar, and just as elements and relations of the grammar appear in a new light when viewed from the organization of sememics (Lamb 1964), so elements and relations of the linguistic code as a whole will appear partly in a new light, viewed from the organization of the elements and relations of the speech act and speech event, themselves part of a system of communicative acts and events characteristic of a group.

To project the ethnography of communication in such a way is tantamount to the belief that there awaits constitution a second descriptive science comprising language, in addition to, and ultimately comprehending, present linguistics—a science that would approach language neither as abstracted form nor as an abstract correlate of a community, but as situated in the flux and pattern of communicative events. It would study communicative form and function in integral relation to each other. In this it would contrast with long held views of linguistics and of what is within linguistics. Some divorce linguistic form from context and function. An old but apt illustration is found in Bloomfield's often cited remark that, if a beggar says "I'm hungry" to obtain food, and a child says "I'm hungry" to avoid going to bed, then linguistics is concerned just with what is the same in the two acts. It abstracts, in other words, from context. In contrast, an influential book has characterized pragmatics in a way exactly complementary as "all those aspects which serve to distinguish one communication event from any other where the sign types may be the same" (Cherry 1961: 225). It abstracts, in other words, from linguistic form.

Such views are not the only ones to be found, but they have been characteristic of linguistics, on the one hand, and social science, on the other, and most practice has exemplified one or the other. For ethnographies of communication, however, the aim must be not so to divide the communicative act or event, divorcing message-form (Cherry's sign-type) and context of use from one another. The aim must be to keep the multiple hierarchy of relations among messages and contexts in view (cf. Bateson, 1963). Studies of social contexts and functions of communication, if divorced from the means that serve them, are as little to the purpose as are studies of communicative means, if divorced from the contexts and functions they serve. Methodologically, of course, it is not a matter of limiting a structural perspective inspired by linguistics to a particular component of communication, but of extending it to the whole.

The ethnography of communication is indebted to the methodological gains from recent studies of linguistic form for its own sake, and to a climate of opinion created by arguments for the significance of formal linguistics. Its roots, however, are deeper and more pervasive. On the one hand, there is the long-term trend away from the study of sociocultural form and content as product toward their study as process—away from study of abstracted categories, departments of culture, toward study of situations, exchanges, and events (cf. Sapir 1933b). On the other hand, there is the continuing trend in linguistics itself toward study of the full complexity of language in terms of what the Prague Circle as long ago as 1929 (the year of Sapir's "The status of linguistics as a

science") called "functional and structural analysis," and which Jakobson now designates as interwar efforts towards a "means-ends model" (Jakobson 1963); there are parallels in the perspectives of J. R. Firth (1935—cf. ch. 4 of this volume) and of Sapir (cf. chs. 3, 10 of this volume) in the same period. These traditions have had their vicissitudes, but it is fair to see in the ethnography of communication a renewal of them.

For many people, the place of the ethnography of communication will appear to be, not in relation to one or more traditions in linguistics, but in relation to some general perspective on human behavior. For many, the name of this perspective will be social anthropology, or sociology, or psychology, or some other disciplinary category. The work required does fall somewhere into place within the purview of each such discipline, and there can be no quarrel with any, except to say that the division of the study of man into departmentalized disciplines seems itself often arbitrary and an obstacle. What is essential, in any case, is that the distinctive focus of concern advanced here be recognized and cultivated, whatever the disciplinary label. One way to state the need is to remark that there are anthropological, sociological, and psychological studies of many kinds, but of ethnographic analyses of communicative conduct, and of comparative studies based upon them, there are still few to find. (Chs. 3 and 4 take up relationships with sociology and social anthropology further.)

These remarks apply as well to the field of interest under which others would subsume the concerns represented here, namely, semiotics. De Saussure had proposed semiology as a field more general than linguistics, and Levi-Strauss has characterized it as the study of the life of signs in the bosom of social life, subsuming both linguistics and social anthropology within it (1960). Despite the broad interpretation given the term, however, semiotics (semiology) has continued to suggest most readily logical analysis, and the study of systems of signs as codes alone. The empirical study of systems of signs within systems of use in actual communities seems secondary, when not lost from sight.

Here a division of semiotics in the tripartite formulation of Morris (1946) might serve. Pragmatics, concerned with the use of signs by an interpreter, might be the bridge between the present area of concern and linguistics proper, and stand as name for the cultivation of theory of the use of language (and other codes), alongside theory of their formal and semantic structure (Morris' syntagmatics and semantics). Such a usage of the term 'pragmatics' indeed seems to be gaining vogue in German-language research. Some characterizations of pragmatics, to be sure, would not be adequate, as has been noted above. A conception of pragmatics as

concerned with what varies in import, while message-form remains constant, allows for but one of the two relationships between structures of action and structures of communicative form. The relations between means and ends are multiple in both directions, the same means serving sometimes varied ends, and the ends being served by sometimes varied means.

In terms of the criteria systematized by Lamb (1964), we can indeed see a natural extension of grammar to features of action, a pragmemic level if one wishes to call it that. Lamb distinguishes linguistic strata by the twin criteria of "diversification" and "neutralization" (see further ch. 4). Diversification is illustrated by such facts as that one element of meaning can occur in diverse representations (as in *dog house* : *kennel*, or *cat house* : *whore house*); neutralization is illustrated by such facts as that the same representation may serve diverse elements of meaning (as *dog* in *dog house, dog fight, dognap*, or *cat* in *cat house, cat fight, catnap*). One might well recognize a stratum involving the "pragmeme" as an element or feature of action, since the same feature of action can occur in diverse semantic representations, and the same semantic representations can serve diverse features of action. To use an example from Susan Ervin-Tripp, the same feature of request may be encoded in "Would you get me my coat?" and "Don't you think it's getting cold?"; and conversely, to complete the example, "Don't you think it's getting cold?" may express (among other things) features of literal question or demand for action ("Get me my coat," "Take me inside").

Invaluable as a structural pragmemics would be, it would not suffice for the whole of the subject. Nor, as ordinarily conceived, would communication theory or cybernetics. What is sometimes specifically meant by each of the latter terms would seem to fit, quite importantly indeed, as parts of a general strategy for ethnographic research into communication.

In general, experience suggests that work contributing to study of communication in an ethnographic spirit is likely not to duplicate work under another aegis. Each of the other general notions seems in practice to lose sight of concrete communication, in the sense of actual communities of persons. Forms of formalization, the abstract possibilities of systems, hoped-for keys to mankind as a whole, seem to overshadow the dogged work of making sense of real communities and lives. I find in this a political as well as a scientific liability. In any case, the long-standing, close ties between ethnography and linguistic description; the ethnographic practice of participant observation; and the values placed on the specifics of cultural life and the viewpoint of the other participants in the communication that is ethnography—

such traits tend to ensure two characteristics. First, there is likely to be a more egalitarian distribution of detailed interest among the several components of communicative events. Not only the participants and the contents of messages, but also the structures, degrees of elaboration, distinctiveness, values and genres associated with channels, codes, message-forms and settings attract attention partly in their own right—the linguistic codes, of course, as most explicit, and as indispensable, if not wholly adequate, avenues of access to other codes, and to the meanings of other components—but also specialized subcodes and marginal systems, techniques of speech disguise, languages of concealment, drum-languages, ceremonial speech and oratory; the channels, especially when complexly elaborated as in West Africa, or distinctively specialized, as writing for lovers' messages among the Hanunoo of the Philippines; the forms of poetry, ritual speech, and dramatic enactment; and so forth. Such aspects of communication are less likely to receive full due in studies whose concern with communication is not so much with an activity of people, but with fodder for models, or not so much with realization of the purposes of others, as with a way of achieving purposes of one's own. The ethnographer is likely to have, or come to have, the view that models are for people, not people for models; and that there are no masses, only ways of regarding people as masses; that one man's mass is another's public, or community, and that to speak of mass communications is already to express a separateness from the portion of humanity concerned that prejudices the result (see Williams 1960: 315–58). The ethnographer is likely to look at communication from the standpoint and interests of a community itself, and to see its members as sources of shared knowledge and insight. I believe that the only worthwhile future for the sciences of man lies in the realization of such an approach (cf. Hymes 1972c).

The linguistics that can contribute to the ethnography of communication is now generally known as sociolinguistics, and it is here that my own training and experience lie. Such a sociolinguistics, however, is not identical with everything that currently comes under that name. The sociolinguistics with which we are concerned here contributes to the general study of communication through the study of the organization of verbal means and the ends they serve, while bearing in mind the ultimate integration of these means and ends with communicative means and ends generally. Such an approach within sociolinguistics can be called, in keeping with the general term, ethnography of communication, the study of the "ethnography of speaking." (Cf. Hymes 1962, and ch. 4). For the contribution of the ethnography of speaking to be

realized, there must be change with respect to a number of orientations toward language. Seven can be singled out as the Pleiades, pointing to the North Star, of this firmament. Primacy must go to (1) the structure, or system of speech (*la parole*); (2) function as prior to and warranting structure; (3) language as organized in terms of a plurality of functions, the different functions themselves warranting different perspectives and organizations; (4) the appropriateness of linguistic elements and messages; (5) diversity of the functions of diverse languages and other communicative means; (6) the community or other social context as starting point of analysis and understanding; (7) functions themselves to be warranted in context, and in general the place, boundaries, and organization of language and of other communicative means in a community to be taken as problematic. In short, primacy of speech to code, function to structure, context to message, the appropriate to the arbitrary or simply possible; but the interrelations always essential, so that one cannot only generalize the particularities, but also particularize the generalities.

It remains that sociolinguistics, conceived in terms of the ethnography of speaking, is ultimately part of the study of communication as a whole. To further establish this context, I shall sketch a general framework in terms of communication proper. The other chapters of this book should be read with the communicative framework in mind.

There are four aspects to the framework, concerned, respectively, with (1) the components of communicative events; (2) the relations among components; (3) the capacity and state of components; and (4) the activity of the whole so constituted. It is with respect to the third and fourth aspects that two topics prominently associated with the topic of communication, communication theory (in the sense of information theory), and cybernetics, find a place.

THE COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE EVENTS

The starting point is the ethnographic analysis of the communicative conduct of a community. One must determine what can count as a communicative event, and as a component of one, and admit no behavior as communicative that is not framed by some setting and implicit question. The communicative event thus is central. (In terms of language the speech event, and speech act, are correspondingly central; see ch. 2).

Some frame of reference is needed for consideration of the several kinds of components copresent in a communicative event. The logical or other superiority of one classification over another