How Cultures

Talk: A Study of Dell Hymes' Ethnography of

Communication

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Abstract:

Humans are unique and so is culture. Humans behave differently when there is a change in the environment and so is the case that when cultures alter, the way of using language, or better still, the way one talks, alters as well. In some cultures, posing a direct question is considered rude, while in other sitting together in silence, without talking, is a norm. These alterations comprise differing interpretations of various components of speech that apply across cultures. Dell Hymes, an anthropologist, urged that there should be a comparative study of speaking, which he called the *ethnography of communication.* The paper would try to analyze the idea that being able to speak one's native language error-free in terms of grammar does not imply that one is competent in the language, but it should also be noted that having a good grasp of the social norms is equally important, if not more important, as well. Also, the paper would focus on Hymes' analytical framework which helps in analyzing the language without much cultural bias. His acronym SPEAKING: Situation, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms and Genres; is intended by him as universal characteristics of speaking.

Keywords: Culture; Ethnography of Communication; Speaking; Language; Norms

It is acknowledged that having a true ability in a language is not only a matter of having a command over the grammar but also of having a spontaneous understanding of certain social norms. In this paper, the authors want to examine this particular notion in detail. The process of speaking alone does not make us comprehend the totality of meaning; rather our understanding of the meaning depends on largely on the context in which those words are spoken. Dell Hymes, a famous anthropologist propagated this idea and was instrumental in establishing the fact that Linguistics only analyzes the grammatical patterning. So, being able to analyze phonemes, morphemes etc. was interesting but incomplete because he observed that the way people use language, what people use speaking for, differs from culture to culture.

For Hymes, linguistics ought to be about language-use as much as about the grammatical essence of language. And this ended up being a formal paradigm for his introduction to the technical term i.e. *ethnography of communication* (Troike, 2003). In this particular theory, the idea is to focus as to what it is to use language in different cultures and how will it change according to the change in its geographical locations and its cultural reflections. One can easily infer that the languages used in many western countries are different from the very basic usage of language in other parts of the world. The amount of variety is much more than one might think; grammar is only a part of competence in a language.

What Hymes was pointing at was that the way people use language is vastly different from place to place. For example, the! Kung, these are the people who live in the Kalahari Desert (Southern Africa) and obviously they have a harsh lifestyle and it conditions certain traits. Their traits, for instance, have been conditioned according to their environmental surroundings. They know that the natural atmosphere for them is not friendly, as they have to struggle very hard for each and everything. That is why they do not want any man-made atmosphere (way of speaking, for instance) to be unfriendly. The kind of escalation which leads to boil-over is looked down upon. Hence, among them there is no such thing as arguments in an open way. As soon as there seems to be any kind of disagreement brewing, a very set kind of speech and a very set kind of exchange is used to resolve disputes (Lee, Hitchcock, 2001). There is not much equivalence to that in the Western culture, except actually if one has a kind of couple's therapy, then one can learn a certain way of speaking to resolve disputes. When these !Kung people are hungry and that happens a lot because these people rely on hunting to eat, and really on many occasions one is just not going to find anything to eat, there is a kind of trance-like speech that they go into to indicate that they are hungry. Majority of the people employ such trance-like speech and it is not weird, because everyone is doing the same thing. That is what one does as a member of the culture. They don't utter the words like "I am hungry". One of the reasons why they don't utter such words is because it would become repetitive and that would not only annoy others, who are hungry too, but also it would demoralize the entire community. For! Kung people, making up stories just for fun is unheard of. It does not make sense to them as to why would anyone make a story about a King and a Queen or a rabbit and a tortoise etc for no particular reason. These are the people who do not make such

kinds of stories. But among these people, the stories that are told have a certain common set of characters that reinforce various cultural rights and hopes that the people have. And so language for them is very different than it is for us. They use it in different ways (McWhorter: 2008).

In the island of Timor (Southeast Asia), which is quite small, it has many languages. Amongst many languages used in this region, there is a particular language referred as "Roti". The people speaking this language are very talkative people and for them silence is a disturbing phenomenon. Silence to them is synonymous with something wrong or unpleasant event/matter. Other examples that can be cited in this context are of the western Apache (Arizona, USA) who are basically very reserved in their interaction with strangers or the Danes (Denmark) who are extremely comfortable with silence, in the sense that they can just sit around and not speak anything for long periods of time (Wardhaugh, 2006).

It is interesting to note that among these people- the Rotis, the Western Apache, the Danes- Indians are like the Rotis. The people in India talk a great deal more to fill in spaces. If anyone is silent for a long time then the other people might think that something is troubling the person. This obviously varies massively within the multicultural India. A major reason for such diversified approach is that geography and history play a very important role in determining the use of language. For example, the Western Apaches generally do not talk when they meet new people because they have been at the receiving end of the massacres by the colonizers. It is quite possible that they have internalized such an event in their mass psyche and are hence, hesitant in meeting and interacting with new and strange people. Similarly, the Rotis, like the Indians, have a high density of population and that makes them interactive in nature. They get to see a lot of people and that is the reason they have the habit of talking a lot. Indian culture is filled with examples showing how the other cultures came to India and they were influenced by it; one reason for their influence is because Indians have a long history of dialogues and debates. Shankaracharyas in the Ancient Indian tradition used dialogue as a way of understanding other people's beliefs and ideas. Similarly, the Bhakti Movement in the Medieval Indian tradition also held dialogue as a very important tool for understanding and interacting with others.

Another very important aspect of culture that reflects variations in their treatment of language is the space in which "Questions and Requests" take place. For example, in Madagascar (Southeast Africa) the language that is spoken is Malagasy and it is interesting to note that Malagasy is an Austronesian language. The home to people speaking Austronesian language is actually the South East Asia, Philippines, Indonesia. One might ponder that some African language might be spoken here for it is in the vicinity of Africa but for some reason what they speak in Madagascar is not a language related to Swahili; instead, they speak a language which is very closely related to Indonesian languages. It is very much clear that these people were not put there and Madagascar did not drift across the Indian Ocean so quickly that it was a matter of continental drift. So, the reason could be that these people sailed there for years and they may have done it in their boats and they got to Madagascar, healthy

enough to procreate and now they are there. Apart from others who are inquisitive to know about this adoption of an altogether different language by Madagascar, it is all time puzzle for a linguist. They wonder as to how these Austronesian speakers went to that island and inhabited it, speaking a strange language to that region and referring it as Malagasy.

In this particular language one does not make a direct request, but if one does it then it symbolizes a kind of invitation to fight/ challenge/ threat to the other person. Making a direct request embodies as an act of rudeness in this culture. For example, if one were to make a statement like "Open the door", it is grammatically correct, but culturally it is not acceptable in that social context, for one is making a *direct* request. People somehow of that culture think that they are being commanded to do so. What can be done in this context is probably to use a passive construction of the language. Instead of saying "Go and open the door" one can say "Let the door be opened". The mentioning of the person is too direct for them. For some other cultures it may appear abnormal, but for them, it is very natural, that is how things happen in Malagasy.

These sorts of things made Hymes come up with an idea that one can take speaking as an occasion where speaking happens in any culture and one can apply a certain basic schema to it.   His idea was that the first thing one might look at, if one comes up with a culture-neutral analysis of what speaking is and how it varies from culture to culture, is a *situation*. There are various kinds of situations, there are situations which are marked by speech and there are situations which are marked by the absence of speech. For instance, refer to the kind of conversation that happens during a ceremony or a party or may be a reunion. The conversations in these situations are marked with extreme informal content and that is well accepted rather appreciated in the some context whereas, for the western apache, there are no such talks or jokes. So, there is a situation and within that situation there are events within and they may be called as the communicative part of a situation. For some people overlapping conversations is not normal, but for some it is absolutely normal. In fact, for the latter, not having an overlapping conversation is an act of abnormality. All these differences in the language pattern and its discourse make sense only because of their different socio-cultural and geographical background.

Beyond this, Hymes came up with an analysis of what he refers to as *components of speech*. The idea was to look into meaning and language without any cultural bias, at the way people converse and inferring that it is not based on sound rather its foundation lies in the speech used. Hymes came up with the acronym, SPEAKING- S for Situation; P for Participation; E for Ends; A for Act sequence; K for Key; I for Instrumentalities; N for Norms and G for Genres.

The *Situation* involves the setting. It involves the physical place or the time. There is a scene which involves the specific activity; be it a card game or a poetry recital or something else. So, when one is analyzing an episode of talking and non-talking in a culture, the first thing to notice is the situation in which that particular conversation took place.

The second point of focus is that of *Participants*, who are not always as simple as someone is talking and someone being addressed. In fact, it is not like that at all,

because there are intermediaries in a conversation. A Chief in many cultures will only speak to his or her subordinates through some kind of address or, who speaks through. And as formulaic that can seem to us, notice that for example, if the Head of the State is found to have committed some heinous kind of act then he might speak to the public only through a lawyer. Suddenly, the Head of the State becomes silent. Another example can be a film star who will talk only through their press agent, if some untoward incident has happened. So, *Participants* can be more layered than just *I am talking to you*.

Then *Ends* is the goals and the outcomes that are desired out of a particular conversation. For example, in a marketplace, bargaining is what the shopkeepers try to do. Sentences are constructed like "You are trying to rob me in broad daylight", "Oh my God, so costly!"- These are the commonly used sentences for bargaining. Or in a break-up dinner, there are certain specific patterns which reflect the "ends" or the goal i.e., of ending the relationship when the dinner ends. Sentences like "Look honey, I have something important to tell you", or "I have to focus on my job/study" are used. Not just these sentences on their superficial level but also the tone of the speech matters a great deal.

Then the *Act Sequence* is what forms of speech act are couched in terms of whether they are set phrases that are used within this act. For example, when there is a break-up dinner, how is the grammar going to be? Will it be a direct quotation or indirect quotation? Let us say, one is doing a sermon, the priest might say, Jesus said "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." (Bible- John 8:7). That is how one is going to say it, in the sermon. It is not said like "Jesus said that you should not cast the first stone if you are without sin". In other words, one quotes him directly. We say, "Jesus said" and then the preacher imitates him.

The *Key* is the manner. Is it jovial, as in a comedy routine in a clown or is it solemn such as at in a funeral, where one does not laugh? These are things that are important in describing things. The surroundings have so much influence and power, and even without it directly doing anything to you, it does many things: like the way one dresses, thinks, or even speaks. That is the reason, in a circus, say for example, people have a mental make-up that they are going there to enjoy and have a good time and they will laugh out loud; their dress also reflects happiness. On the other hand, in a funeral, people are sad-faced; they do not speak loudly, unless they are crying. There is silence all around. The dress, too, is mostly dim and dark.

Instrumentalities refer to the channel of communication; it could be just talking face to face, or it could be talking on the phone or banging the drums or it could simply be writing, if one is using the standard dialect or if one is using the non-standard one etc. These things change. In Pop Songs, it is assumed that one will use informal, colloquial, non-standard dialect. The singers would suddenly be "tellin" instead of "telling", saying "em" instead of "them". These jargons are not overplayed by the target audience for they expect such deviations in tune with the creative liberties that music, poetry and other forms of creative expression may adopt. It was, however not true, maybe a hundred years ago. There was a time when in the early history of pop songs, it was considered a big deal to use "ain't" in it; it also had the power of selling

the song. So, we must keep in mind that these things change depending on the acceptability of the society.

Then, there is *Norms* so that gets into the conversational styles; if you have gaps or you avoid them. It even includes the intonation patterns.

Finally, there are the *Genres* to which a conversation belongs to- if we are talking about proverbs or if we are dealing with myths; is it a commercial message or is it just casual?

With the detailed description of the acronyms of SPEAKING, it is now relevant to further elaborate on Hymes' idea of *ethnography of communication*.   His idea is that each one of this component is something that one can consider equivalent to the *phoneme*. All cultures are dealing with these components in one way or another. The issue is that variations are between them. Hymes' idea was that there are *emic* distinctions i.e., the situation as differentiated from the participants as differentiated from the instrumentalities. And there are *etic* distinctions i.e., the basic stereotypical generalizations about human behavior; like the Danes don't talk and the Rotis talk too much, that sort of thing (Floyd, Jeanni- Youtube, Internet). So, his idea would be in Malagasy, the way the requests are couched differ in Act Sequence from the ones in English. So to say, "Let the door be opened" is different in terms of grammatically how one conveys requests, just as cultures will differ within a sermon using a direct quote or indirect quote.

In Antigua, the Caribbean island, when people do informal debating, they overlap over one another and are repetitive. This is considered normal and it is not chaotic for them. Not doing such a thing might look strange to them. But our notion of what an interruption is in that kind of setting is different. Their norms are different, it does not mean that they are not "normal", it just means that their norms are different and how they are using the language in that particular *emic* department, differs in an *etic* way. We need to understand concepts like *normal* or *abnormal*. Generally, it is stated that abnormal is anything which deviates from the norm. But the real question is- what *is* the norm and who decides it. Poststructuralist thinkers would not go by that definition because all these definitions are socially constructed and any construction is built on top of something. That something on which it is built upon is the margin. Those who hold power and authority, they construct and spread a definition and soon it becomes *meaning* at the cost of killing other definitions. So, in the case of norms, as to what is normal or what is abnormal, those who have the power, they have defined and spread the norms according to their own vantage point of view. Anything or anyone that goes against such definition is considered *abnormal*. So we have to keep in mind such terms and concepts before understanding the cultural issues.

In the case of Panama (Central America), there is a Native American culture called the Cuna and every few days the people there listen to a speech by their chief who discusses politics, history or religion. During the course of his speaking, there has to be a responder (*apinsuet*) and the responder keeps saying "so it is", *teki*. That has to be there, the chief can't give much if there is no one to respond in that particular way. One reason for such a kind of behavior is that the chief somehow wants an appreciation of the people and since if all the people respond while the chief is

speaking then it would amount to the disturbance in his speech; hence, we have one responder who acts like the mouth-piece of the people. The language style that the chief uses are a special kind of style- highly elaborative. And then the chief signals that the speech is over by lowering his voice, not raising it (Sherzer, 1991). We are used to hearing things like "Bharat Mata ki… JAY", instead they have "BHARAT Mata ki jay".

That is the way it happens with Cuna people too. If we are looking at them, the idea would be to do an *Ethnography of Communication* analysis and look at how language is used in various situations and it can make things look exotic but it is interesting to note how exotic we are in some ways. Imagine how odd it is that we have a tradition of stand-up comedy where someone stands in front of an audience and entertains for 10-20 minutes. This seems peculiar to some. Another case would be when we see a political debate. When we listen to the speakers, we understand what the politicians are saying and it makes sense to us, as far are the language structure and grammar is concerned, but we still have hours and hours of T.V. news shows repeating the whole thing and rephrasing it again and again and the news anchors tell us what we have already heard and understood.

Harold Garfinkel, a sociologist, on a similar line of Hymes focus, founded the field of ethnomethodology which focuses on how people interpret events and conversations through their experiences and expectations. A fundamental aspect of this interpretive ability is that it is developed by participation in a particular society, within particular contexts and certain events. Language is recognized as a key medium through which such interpretation is actually achieved (Garfinkel, 1964). In a series of experiments, Garfinkel had his students do some really interesting research to show how much we rely on social consensus to make meaning of our conversation. What he wanted to do was to examine what happens when we don't adhere to expectations that we bring to conversations. Essentially what he suggested was that his students become linguistic troublemakers. So, he had his students purposefully violate some of our conventional rules that we bring to a conversational event. In one such experiment, for example, he had his students talk to their friends in a normal conversation; something that they normally do. Then, while acting like it was entirely natural he had them insist that their conversational partner clarify the meaning of every day common remarks. Here is an example of one of the experiments:

(S) Hi, Ray. How is your girlfriend feeling?

(E) What do you mean, "How is your girlfriend feeling?" Do you mean physical or mental?

(S) I mean how is she feeling? What's the matter with you?

(E) Nothing. Just explain a little clearer, what do you mean?

(S) Skip it. How are your Med School applications coming?

(E) What do you mean, "How are they?"

(S) You know what I mean.

(E)   I really don't

(S) What's the matter with you? Are you sick?" (Allan, 2013)

It turned out that the students were really able to frustrate their conversational partners

quickly, but not surprisingly. So it can be inferred that sometime we take a conversation for granted that requires us to do a lot of processing to be actually successful.

As an anthropologist, Hymes was extremely interested in the connection between language and society. He wanted to look not just the grammatical system itself but at a whole range of other types of competencies about how, when and where we use language. The ethnographic approach that was pioneered by Hymes sought to understand the social and cultural knowledge and the values that underlie how we use language in social situation of a variety of types. And by drawing on the insights of this approach, we can now better understand how members of a speech community learn to communicate and how situational factors are constitutive of speech event itself. Likewise the work of Hymes and others gave us a very useful tool for exploring cross-cultural communication, because it is keenly sensitive to the fact that cultures will vary on how they value and perform on different aspects of talk.   Who we are certainly impacts on what we say. Connecting to other people after all, is the ultimate goal of human communication.   Conversation, or in other words, connected, co-constructed speech, is always tied to particular people and particular activities and particular places. And these people we converse with come with their own linguistic baggage and their expectations about what is going to be said and what is going to be done. So, who we talk to and where and why we talk is really important in shaping our linguistic contributions. Different speaking events have very different linguistic behaviors that are technically associated with them. We learn to tailor our speech approximately as part of our general cultural socialization. Now, this in turn creates and sustains linguistic organizations of specific speech events as being recognizable and "normal" by other members of that society. For example, these three statements conjure up a mental image (Fridland, 2015):

1. You will not go there, Counselor, or you will be charged with contempt.
2. Please eat your veggies if you want dessert
3. I now pronounce you man and wife.

It is quite easy to construct the mental images after reading these statements. Even out of context one gets a clear sense of the event, the setting and their participants that would be appropriate for each of these. The first sentence is in the court; second in a family setting, may be by a mother and third by a priest. All of these are part of our learned language routines. We don't just know how to construct such sentences; we also know what context and events they typically describe. We use this information to interact and engage as members of a society.

This knowledge refers to what is appropriate and is known as Communicative competence. It is essentially using language in a socially informed way to achieve our communication goals. To do this, we must have more knowledge about grammatical system. We must understand where and how to use language in a particular context. It includes the knowledge of linguistic and social conventions. Think about how participants in a particular culture cooperatively create norms for various speech events. Daily activities   like going to a doctor, dealing with the children, dating, or attending a business meeting; one can see how these shared acts of communication

actually help construct our social reality for a particular group or society. It lets us know our own and particularly others' actions.

To interact successfully requires a social consensus; a social consensus, that we are going to act in particular way and be properly understood because we are acting within those confines. Now this consensus allows us to infer much more than we actually explicitly say when we have a conversation. So, for example, when I say to a colleague who is chatting at my office door, "Hey, you need something?" what I actually mean "Hey mister get moving, I have to work". Hopefully we both understand the meaning of the sentence. That is why we use contextual norms, the setting and the knowledge of participants to actually understand the intent of the conversation.

How one says something has important implications for what others think they hear or what they perceive. How we use language changes greatly depending on when, where, why and to whom we are speaking. One needs to understand that language use involves a whole lot of communicative process, not just on its own single individual system. That is why we need to look at language more holistically. It is essential to understand how bigger units of talks, built up and structured in a conversation, are used as a form of social organization. After all humans are social creatures and our picture of language in society would be dolefully incomplete if we did not explore what is involved linguistically when we actually converse with one another, because sometimes we do that. It is important to note that when one speaks in a social setting, one's speech is not just an individual act, but also how one's speech is shaped in response to the other person's. So, it is necessary to take a neutral or rather inclusive stand/stance before being judgmental on any cultural practice. It is possible/ probable that the geographical/social/cultural background is the cause of their behavior in a particular fashion. Instead of judging things with just one universal lens, it is better to see the subjective differences; and instead of binding them into the canons of what is *normal* or what is *abnormal* it is imperative to notice and accept the fact that our world is made up of various social and cultural constructs which need to be respected and responded accordingly.

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