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# Ethnography of Communication: Analysing Literature as a Cultural Artifact

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## Abstract

*This paper explores Hymes approach to analyzing language, widely known as Ethnography of communication. The approach provides an important methodological tool in investigating the relationship between text, society and culture. Based on multidisciplinary approach, ethnography of communication examines how a text shapes and is shaped by social and cultural contexts. It investigates texts within a particular culture or speech community by considering factors of social and cultural contexts: setting, participants, purpose, speech acts and norms relating the text and speech. This paper draws attention to the main argument of the approach that a language use is not just about the words used by its users, but also about the social and cultural practices, beliefs, and norms that influence how the language is used, shapes and is shaped by social and cultural factors. Discussing Hymes framework of communication, this paper focuses on important concepts like speech community, speech situation, speech event, speech acts, components of speech events. The paper also distinguishes between Chomskyan notion of competence with the Hymes notion of communicative competence as the true object of inquiry in the study of language use. Focusing on the theoretical foundations, the paper highlights methodological strengths of the approach over other methods of literature analysis especially the relevance of social and cultural context as a crucial factor in analyzing texts as cultural artifacts. Although, the model was developed for language analysis of indigenous speech communities, the paper argues the relevance and usefulness of the model in analyzing literary texts as cultural artifacts. The paper emphasizes the unique position ethnographic approach offers by providing insights into how the social and cultural factors, for instance identity, social status, prestige, relationship, are responsible for shaping text and speech.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Knowing a language means an inherent awareness of its socio-cultural milieu and not just the mere knowledge of its grammar, semantics or phonology. The social and cultural context and various other external factors play a significant part in providing the social and cultural meaning to language. If a language user lacks understanding of the factors that come to life in the real world in which language operates, the user cannot claim to have a complete understanding of the used language.

Ethnography of communication considers the social and cultural aspects of communication to have the full and comprehensive understanding of language use (Saville-Troike, 1982). Ethnographic approach highlights the importance of the describing ethnic communities. The approach, thus, represents an intersecting discipline in which the linguist assumes the role of an ethnographer and collects data related to patterns of language and styles of speech of various communities. Dell Hymes and John Gumperz were the pioneers in the ethnographic approach to language use. Rejecting abstract and mental categories to language and grammar analysis, Hymes (1986, 1999) emphasized the study of language in social settings. By doing so, he focused on discovering the “universals of language use” in the same way as Chomsky was interested in the universals of grammar (Figueroa 1994: 42). This helps in description of the speaking practices of indigenous speech communities. In his own words, his approach to study language was “socially constituted linguistics” (1999: 14) since Hymes argued it is only in relation to socio-cultural setting that meaning of an utterance can be understood. He further argued “[t]o put it in grossly simplified form: in seeking structure, Saussure is concerned with the word, Chomsky with the sentence, the ethnography of speaking with the act of speech” (Hymes, quoted in Figueroa 1994: 40).

For L2 language learners and speakers, ethnographic approach to language is becomes central since it highlights that general linguistic knowledge – grammar and syntax, is not the only prerequisite to knowing a language. Hua (2005) emphasizes that social and cultural awareness

concerns not only with ‘what’ but also with ‘how’ and ‘why’. He further emphasized how differences in culture impacts styles of language use. The social and cultural knowledge concerns with that aspect of meaning which is related to the norms of speaking which varies from culture to culture. Different speech communities, for instance, have different norms of salutation and address, norms of engagement with people, place and time. Thus, terms or titles of address in different speech communities differ depending on age, position, status, gender, social hierarchy etc.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on ethnography of communication explains the framework of communication as formulated by Hymes. This literature concerns with the conceptual framework used in the ethnography of communication and includes concepts like “speech community, speech situation, speech event, speech acts, components of speech events, functions of speech, etc” (Hymes 1986: 53). To have a better understanding of ethnographic approach to communication, it is important to have a good understanding of these concepts.

### Speech Community

The term speech community is a slippery and complex notion. Different scholars have attempted to define it. In the words of Hymes (1986: 54) himself the notion “postulates the unit of description as a social, rather than linguistic, entity”. From the ethnographic perspective, Hymes (1986: 54) says, the term is defined as follows: “a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety... both conditions are necessary”. No one can claim to be a member of a speech community just because they share grammatical rules in the language they speak. Even though, one is able to grammatically identify someone’s language but may not understand the message since they could be “ignorant of what counts as a coherent sequence, request, statement requiring an answer, requisite or forbidden topic, marking of emphasis or irony, normal duration of silence, normal level of voice, etc” (Hymes 1986: 54). Therefore, a speech community, Hymes says can

be defined as: “[t]o the extent that speakers share knowledge of the communicative constraints and options governing a significant number of social situations, they can be said to be members of the same speech community” (1986: 16). It follows that therefore, “[m]embers of the same speech community need not all speak the same language nor use the same linguistic forms on similar occasions. All that is required is that there be at least one language shared so that speaker can decode the social meaning carried by alternative modes of communication” (ibid.).

The term speech community as a notion can be understood variously. It can be understood in the framework of, first, structural linguistics, second, sociology of language and ethnography of communication perspective, and third in the Labovian sociolinguistics sense. The first view sees a speech community in terms of the existence of a single language use by the community. In the second view, unity of people based on symbolic integration by way of assembling in a dense network of communicative interaction is a significant criterion for group of people belonging to a speech community (Gumperz 1999). Both Gumperz and Hymes (1986) believe that a common linguistic system is a requirement, although it is not a sufficient condition for the people to belong to the same speech community. In the last and final perspective, common attitudes and values towards a language in use makes up a speech community.

In conclusion the term speech community as a notion comes to exist not just by common variety or language, common norms and conventions of language use must also be shared among the people belonging to the same speech community. An L2 English speaker along with the L1 English speaker will form a speech community provided only if they share common norms of language use. This means norms that are socially accepted and culturally appropriate with regards to linguistic behaviour.

### **Speech Situation**

There are many other important notions in the ethnographic model like speech situation, speech event and speech act. These notions are in relation to each other such that there operates a hierarchy between them. Thus, as a unit

speech act a smaller unit which combines to form a speech event. And speech events in turn combine to form a speech situation. Hymes (1986) himself provides the relationship between these units through the following example:

A party  
Speech situation  
A diner in the party  
Speech event  
A joke at the dinner  
Speech act

Speech situation, as can be seen above, is a large unit made up of smaller one or more speech events, which in turn are made up a series of speech act. Some of the examples of speech situations that Hymes gave are ceremonies, fights, hunts, dinner or lunch etc. In the example of a hunt, both verbal and nonverbal events may come together to make up a speech situation (Hymes 1986).

### **Speech Event**

In Hymes framework, a speech event is taken as “the basic unit of analysis” whereas speech community, which embeds speech events are taken as “the social unit of analysis” (Gumperz 1986: 16-17). It could be considered that “...any speech governed by norms of behavior would be a speech event” (Figueroa 1994: 50). Interviews for jobs, questionnaire surveys, buyer-seller transaction, religious sermons, classroom lectures etc. are some examples of speech events (Lillis 2006). Hymes declares that speech events are:

[R]estricted to activities or aspects of activities that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech. Such an event may consist of just a single speech act, or of several: a speech act may be the whole of a speech event, and of a speech situation (say, a rite consisting of a single prayer, itself a single invocation). (Hymes 1986: 56)

An interesting thing to note is the recurrence of the same type of speech act in different types of speech events, and the same type of speech event in different speech situations. So, a joke as a speech act may be a part of a class lecture, a

private conversation, a formal introduction (Hymes 1986).

### **Speech Act**

As the smallest unit, speech acts achieve specific social function. In ethnography of communication, a speech act is a minimal unit that is different from a sentence but maintains the same tone or key and the same rules for interaction with the same set of participants. They can be both verbal and non-verbal. It is worth to note that the speech acts of ethnography appear to be like the speech act of Austin and Searle as an action, a reply, a request, a question, a command, etc. (Figueroa 1994:50). However, Hymes term is used in a broader sense.

### **Communicative Competence**

In the beginning, it was attempted to understand what does it mean to knowing a language or what does it mean to say that someone is skilled in language use? This was one of the most important concerns of Hymes. He attempts to answer this question by defining the idea of 'fluent speaker.' Meaningful communication requires the language user to follow norms acceptable to the society and appropriateness the communicative norms to the given culture. Language users, for instance, are constrained by various socio-cultural norms of communication. For instance, norms of language behavior operating in a classroom, in a marriage function, at a place of worship, at an educational gathering etc. In a classroom students' behavior is often influenced by the setting of the classroom, behavior of the teacher and many other contingencies of the setting. Communicative competence, as a socio-cultural notion, is central to Hymes model. The term can be defined as the ability of a member of a speech community to understand and use the rules of interpretation and comprehension of speech. You can appreciate that such a knowledge is different to the knowledge of grammatical rules based on the speaker's ability to interpret a language. The latter includes the rule of phonology, grammar, and semantics of a language or its variety. Scholars like Troike (1982) believes communicative competence includes the speaker knowledge and expectation of who and how language is used in a specific social setting. It is

also important to emphasize here that the notion of communicative competence runs contrary to Chomsky's ideas of linguistic competence which includes rules of grammar in a homogenous speech community. Hymes rejected Chomsky's linguistics in which the language operates in an ideal speaker-hearer community in which the communication is without any distraction, internal or external (Lillis 2006). Hymes stresses that communication takes place in a context in which there is a degree of acceptability, grammaticality, feasibility and possibility in a social context.

### **III. COMPONENTS OF SPEECH (SPEAKING)**

In the Hymesian framework, any speech event can be described in terms of various components. These components are expressed by Hymes using mnemonic SPEAKING. Hymes says that ethnography of a communicative event is really a description of all the components that are relevant in understanding how that communicative event operates in a social and cultural context. This approach provides a model to compare different speaking practices across communities (Hymes 1986; Troike 1982). Sixteen components are identified by Hymes.

#### **Setting and Scene (S)**

In simple terms, setting denotes to time and place which are the real and tangible physical circumstances in which speech happens to take place. For example, a class of English poetry at 12:00, the lecture theatre, first floor in the department of English, the Assistant Professor of poetry and the power point overhead showing slides etc. is an example of a setting of the speech. Whereas scene denotes to the abstract and intangible "psychological setting or the cultural definition of the occasion." (Hymes 1986: 60). Participants, within a setting have the freedom to change scenes, as they change the level of formality or informality. For instance, in the same classroom the Assistant Professor teaching poetry, may assume a serious tone while explaining critical theories of poetic analysis and may get angry if the pupils in the classroom are not attentive enough or alternatively becomes informal crack a joke and evoke laughter, if deemed fit to change the overtly serious mood prevailing in the class. Any change

in the type of activity also brings a change in the scene. The professor, for instance, might shift from lecturing to explaining how to do a critical examination of a poem. To use a Hymes (1986) example, a shift in the dramatic time in a play or a movie illustrates a change in the scene where the setting remains constant.

### **Participants (P)**

Hymes (1986) believes that the tripartite distinction of speaker-hearer-topic is based on a faulty understanding of creating an unnatural dyad, speaker-hearer, source-destination, sender-receiver, and addressor-addressee). He argues that many contexts demand a description of three participants which can be labelled as addressor, addressee, hearer (audience), source, spokesman. For instance, think of a wedding or a prayer you attended the last time. Do you think the priest, while he chants religious words or hymns, was really a speaker of those utterances? The religious chants or hymns the priest utters are really the product of the priest himself, i.e. is the priest the source of his utterance. Obviously not. Thus, one label the priest as the speaker on the occasion. Both in place of worship or at the ceremony, roles can be assigned to the God or the deity, the priest and the audience. The various combinations Hymes term Participants include in it are speaker-listener, addressor-addressee, or sender-receiver.

### **Ends (E)**

There are two things that are referred by the term ends. First is the conventionally recognized and expected outcomes of an exchange, and second is the personal goals that participants seek to accomplish on particular occasions. Hymes defined outcomes as the public aspect, whereas goals as the personal aspect – the two often clash and compete. He draws the attention to the fact that there is a constant struggle between the socio culturally expected outcomes and the outcomes individual desire and wish of the participant in every speech event or speech act. A participant, for instance, may desire to be appreciated after a wonderful performance at local theatre last night, however the following day the participant finds slogans stencilled all over on the walls of the theatre vicinity asking for an apology over the use of casteist language in the play. Highlighting the distinction between

outcomes and goals, he exemplifies in any event the community's perspective may be at odds with the participants, for example, in the event of a negotiation both participants wish to win and wants the other to lose. Again, can be readily observed that in a business negotiation or a bargain between customer and a seller there exists different ends in the minds of the participants.

### **Act Sequence (A)**

The term act sequence denotes to the exact words the participants use and how they use to express a certain topic delved upon. Hymes labels the participant's exact words as the message form whereas how they are expressed as the message content. A speech is made up of a form and a content. You can see, for example, that while greeting others "hello", "good evening" or "hi" can be used, however, a non-verbal nod of a head, a wave of a hand, a bow or just a smile would suffice for the greeting without being you labelled as uncouth. In these examples a definite message form – verbal or non-verbal is used to do the greeting as a display of phatic communion. However, in case of a mismatch between form and content that arise because of "...how something is said is part of what is said" (Hymes 1986: 59). The following illustrates clearly the difference between message form and message content: "He prayed, saying „..." (quoting message form) vs. "He prayed that he would get well" (reporting content only) (Hymes 1986: 59). The topic, it could be observed is bonded with the content of the language and in case of any shift in the topic, it is reflected in a complementary shift in the content of the language. Thus, integral to speech act are both the message form and the message content and together their interrelatedness is called as the act sequence.

### **Key (K)**

The term key denotes to in what manner, tone or spirit language conveys its message. (Hymes 1986). For instance, at times you are serious, light-hearted or sarcastic. However, it is interesting to note that, you sometime deliver a message jokingly or smilingly, but you are serious. The key can be analysed by other participant by taking clue from your nonverbal behavior or through your gesture or the way of

your posture or even the kind of clothes you are putting on. But sometime there happens to be a clash between them, in such cases of contradictions between the content and the key that the participants use, the precedence is always taken by the key rather than the content. For example, in case of parodies participants exploit key over the content of the message. Emphasizing the key Hymes stressed “when it is conflict with the overt content of an act, it often overrides the latter (as in sarcasm)” (1986: 62).

### **Instrumentalities (I)**

The term instrumentalities denote to the various choices of channel the participant use in communication – oral, written, telegraphic, semaphore etc. but, also the term denote to the actual forms of speech that are chosen that includes the language, dialect, code, or register. One example of a type of instrumentality can be labelled as: formal, written, legal discourse. Another important point to take note when understanding the term is the different modes of communication used by the participant in a specific channel of communication – singing, humming, whistling or chanting all fall under oral channel.

### **Norms of Interaction and Interpretation (N)**

The term norms of interaction denote to “the specific behaviours and properties that attach to speaking – that one must not interrupt, for example, or that one may freely do so; that normal voice should not be used except when scheduled in a church service (whisper otherwise); that turns in speaking are to be allocated in a certain way” (Hymes 1986: 64). It is easily seen that there exist certain definite norms of speech in any community. For example, a visit to a place of worship certain norms which are different than that of attending a class lecture or a conference.

In case of violations norms there may be problems in comprehension or even a complete failure of communication leading to miscommunication. Across different speech communities there exist different norms of interpreting. For example, extending your hand for a shake with your boss or a senior may have different social value – may be reprimanded in some or viewed as a through gentleman. These culturally inflected differences can be related to

loudness, silence, gaze return, politeness, informality etc. Some scholars, like Danesi (2004:116) notes that “a tap on the side of the head can indicate completely opposite things – “stupidity” or “intelligence”-according to cultural context.”

### **Genre (G)**

The term genre denotes to the clear and obvious distinction between different types of utterances. These utterances rely on the type of speech event in which the participants are engaged. Poetry and prose are examples of genres that are of two different types. It is obvious that your professor will offer a lecture on literary criticism by employing the language used for prose and not the language that is normally used for a piece of poetry. Some commonly used genres used for different types of speech or texts are proverbs, riddles, sermons, prayers, lectures etc.

## **IV. SIGNIFICANCE AND DOMAIN OF APPLICATION**

Hymes model of ethnography of communication is an important approach not only in linguistic studies but it can be a useful tool for literature research. As a method, it can analyze language in literature from within specific social and cultural contexts and to view literary language as a tool that shapes and in turn is shaped by social and cultural realities which literature reflects. Focusing on language in use, the method can analyze how literary language conveys meaning and construct social realities of the author and the characters created.

Analyzing literary language, ethnography of communication can be used to study patterns within literary texts and examine how authors use language to create meaning and convey social messages. At the same time, it can be an important tool to investigate and explore the cultural contexts in which literary texts are produced and consumed. This will help to understand how language reflects and shapes cultural values and beliefs. Another important use of the approach is the examination of the processes of interactions between different kinds of literary texts, how other texts and literary practices interact in a specific society and culture. This process of interaction between texts is called as intertextuality which focuses on

highlighting how literary language shape cultural memory and identity.

The study of speech styles and dialects is an important part of literary expression. Styles and dialects are inextricably linked to society and culture. For the study of styles and dialects ethnographic approach to communication is useful by focusing on their role in shaping literature texts and highlighting their cultural significance in shaping social realities.

In literary research, ethnographic approach to communication is useful in analyze and investigating the role of the social and cultural norms of a particular community in shaping the interaction and language use between the characters. It can also be used to analyze the shaping of literary text within the context of the communicative and the cultural competence in which the text is produced. Identity in literary text is an important theme and genre in literature. ethnographic approach to communication is useful for research studies interested in the analysis of language and identity construction specially with respect to studies on themes of marginalization and alienation.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on multidisciplinary approach, ethnography of communication offers a comprehensive framework to analyze speech and text as interaction between its user from social and cultural perspective. One of the major strengths of this approach is that it provides an opportunity to seamlessly integrate socio-cultural aspects and text to provide a framework of language analysis. Although the significance of socio-cultural aspects in shaping a text has long been recognised, these factors are often ignored due to lack of a robust analytical model. Hymes (1986) through his model emphasized the crucial role of language in its real socio-cultural context which renders a more nuanced and proper understanding of language use in any textual analysis of a piece of literature. Ethnography approach can contribute to bring to the fore the how literature is shaped by relations between people in social and cultural world, which help in understanding such relations, for instance, text and identity, text and gender, text

and power, and any other combination which involves interaction of language and socio-cultural factors.

In conclusion, ethnographic based research involves an approach to understand language as a social and cultural practice which provides insights into literature as a socio-cultural embedded text and treating literature as a cultural artifact.

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