Ethnography of Communication

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Key Points

- observation of actual communicative practices
- the communication-culture nexus
- interdisciplinary, qualitative, and critical approaches to everyday interaction
- emerging encoding practices and processes in new media environments
- a reflexive/meta-communicative approach to people's understanding of communicative action

Abstract

Ethnography of Communication (EoC) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of communicative practices, events, and contexts. Originating in the works of the North American linguistic anthropologist and folklorist Dell Hymes in the 1960s–1970s, it has since expanded and transfigured in various disciplines and fields in the Social Sciences and Humanities. EoC combines a theoretical view of communication, language (and semiotic systems more broadly), and social interaction, alongside a method of inquiry (the SPEAKING guidelines). EoC is productive in studying interpersonal, organizational, and intercultural communicative practices and contexts, digital environments, and non-verbal types of interaction.

Introduction

Ethnography of communication (EoC) is an interdisciplinary ethnographic approach to the study of communicative practices, events, and contexts. It is valuable in drawing large-scale sociocultural and organizational insights from the study of specific communication events. The term 'ethnography' stresses observable and documentable practices, alongside the settings, the semiotic environments, and the socio-material and socio-technological affordances which allow them. The term 'communication' concerns the media, modes, norms, and goals of communication. As an approach, EoC combines a theoretical orientation to communication, language, and social interaction—and semiotic systems more broadly—with a method of inquiry which includes guidelines for conducting communication-centered ethnography (**The SPEAKING Model**; see below).

Historical Context and Milieu

EoC originated in the works of the North American linguistic anthropologist and folklorist Dell Hymes, who coined the term 'ethnography of speaking' (Hymes, 1962). In later collaboration with John Gumperz, the scope of the term was expanded to address 'ethnography of communication' (Gumperz & Hymes, 1964, 1972). Hymes (1974) stressed 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' (p. 4).

Hymes was working within an intellectual milieu rich with past and contemporary dialogs. Historically, the works of the anthropologist Franz Boaz, the anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir, the linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson, and the literary theorist Kenneth Burke had an impact on the issues Hymes and his contemporaries grappled with in terms of the language-cultural axis, and the nuanced and complex semiotic systems ordinarily employed in actual communicative occasions and events. Unlike de Saussure's earlier emphasis on the mental system of language (*la langue*), EoC was set to highlight and

emphasize actual practice. To this, an appreciation of the poetic-aesthetic dimension of communication was added (through the influences of Jakobson and Burke), which paved the way to a performative and emergent view of sociocultural meaning-making processes.

In terms of the contemporary/postwar academic zeitgeist, at the University of Pennsylvania were working, alongside Hymes, Bill Labov (linguistics) and Erving Goffman (sociology), whose works and interests intersected: Goffman's focus on social situations (Goffman, 1967) and Labov's focus on social aspects of language use, sociolinguistics, and dialect studies (Labov, 1972a, 1972b) corresponded with Hymes's articulation of EoC. Lastly, Hymes's colleagues also coalesced around rejecting the powerful Chomskyan linguistic paradigm (transformational-generative grammar). According to Johnstone and Marcellino (2010), Hymes was 'particularly critical of Chomsky's idea of linguistic competence and his failure to account for linguistic variation. Locating language within an a priori mental grammar does not account for or even acknowledge the enormous role of the socially contextualized ways we use language in determining the shape of utterances' (p. 3). Hymes (1974) rather advocated that 'within the social matrix in which it acquires a system of grammar, a child acquires also a system of its use' (p. 75). EoC views speech, and other semiotic systems of communication, as encompassing *both* the 'means of speech' available for communication (the know-how), and the 'speech economy' within which communicative behavior is semiotically evaluated (the value-of). Hymes clearly indicated that the role of the *value of communication* is central to EoC, and that the ethnography's 'descriptive focus is the speech economy of the community' (Hymes, 1962, p. 221). The economic/market metaphor Hymes employed became popular, offering an instrumental-functional view of communication, together with a critical orientation helpful in assessing both communicative practices and those who possess the power and authority to assess their value. Understanding how value is perceived through social interaction has proved helpful especially in intercultural and global contexts (Blommaert, 2004).

Growth and Expansion

EoC's interdisciplinary origins resulted in its prolific employment across various fields and disciplines, which have themselves dynamically shifted over the last half a century. The 'second generation' of ethnographers of communication were mostly linguistic anthropologists and folklorists, including students and colleagues of Hymes, whose work is displayed in the anthology *Explorations in the Ethnography of Communication* (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974), offering an upsurge in contexts, sites, and applications.

Observing the accelerated reception of EoC in the following decades (the late 1980s and 1990s), communication scholars Carbaugh and Boromisza-Habashi (2015) note that over 250 EoC publications appeared during that time. The studies reflect works by the 'second generation' of EoC scholars, and increasingly also by scholars in nearby fields. Later, in an online resource tracking EoC studies, Shavit (2023) details over 80 academic EoC publications which appeared between 2015 and 2024.[1] These figures suggest that EoC studies are continually being pursued, while, at the same time, new configurations and developments in EoC are progressively applied and published, although not as 'named' EoC studies.

The paradigmatic breakthrough EoC accomplished in the 1970s was a result of two crucial shifts. The first was a move away from the traditional sites-of-study that linguistic anthropologists and folklorists explored: a move from examining primarily the languages and rituals of nonliterate peoples (anthropology), which was mostly still under the influence of the historic-geographic approach (folklore), to examining contemporary, urban, and institutional environments. Put simply, scholars began looking at different settings, practices, and processes taking place geographically closer to the ethnographer's home—such as in modern urban settings (Labov, 1972b), or, in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's analysis of 'A Parable in Context', in the home of the ethnographer's mother (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1975). In the words of Bauman and Sherzer (1975), EoC turned to examine 'aspects of contemporary American society in addition to the more remote milieux traditionally studied by anthropologists' (p. 102).

As a result of this paradigmatic breakthrough, new multi-disciplinary adaptations of EoC emerged. Indeed, in the mid-1970s Bauman and Sherzer (1975) commented that if 'in 1964, the promise of the relationship between the ethnography of speaking and sociology was far from clear; by 1972 […] it was readily apparent' (p. 102). Indeed, Garfinkel, Sacks, & Schegloff have published chapters in the edited collection on new directions of EoC (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972), which marked prolific and watershed intersections that EoC occupied with nearby emerging and evolving fields (such as ethnomethodology and conversation analysis). These synergic intersections resulted from a common fascination with the detailed examination of actual patterns, uses, contexts, and functions of language in contemporary social life.

Additional fields which adopted EoC prolifically include education, in part due to Hymes's interest in diversity and inequality in educational contexts (Hymes served as Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania). Various subfields of education employ EoC, including classroom interaction and management, higher education, and more. Another emerging rich subfield to later adopt EoC is linguistic ethnography, where interesting intersections with EoC rest on the differences in the developments of anthropology and applied linguistics in Britain and the US (see the special issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* dedicated to linguistic ethnography and edited by Tusting & Maybin, 2007; see also Creese, 2008; Tusting, 2020).

[1]See https://nimshav.github.io/EthnoComm-Repository/

Growth and Expansion within Communication Studies

Since the early 2000s, EoC has had the most traction arguably in the field of communication studies, where it was adopted readily by scholars studying the language-communication nexus (often termed language and social interaction or LASI), defined as 'an approach to the study of language and social interaction' (Carbaugh & Boromisza-Habashi, 2015, p. 537; see also Leeds-Hurwitz, 2010). Notable advances include early seminal works which examined the relations between speech and language, and culture and communication, as detailed below.

Katriel and Philipsen (1981) employed Hymes's SPEAKING model (see below) to reflect on the cultural and meta-communicative value of the term 'communication' in American English in both face-to-face interactions and in the media. Their research indicates that the term served as a culturally coded category of interpersonal communication, where 'communication' was not used literally, but was employed to designate a *value-laden verbal ritual*. It indexed interpersonal 'work' that needed to be performed in order to negotiate the gap between hyper-individualism and society/community, and the reaffirmation of one's individualist identity. Katriel & Philipsen conclude that as a meta-communication term, the use of the word 'communication' serves as 'a culturally distinctive solution to the universal problem of fusing the personal with the communal' (p. 91). This and similar EoC studies were influential because they shift efficiently between the analysis of detailed speech events (micro) and offering insights of a larger, sociocultural nature (macro), while studying diverse types of verbal communication.

Katriel's later study of the Hebrew Dugri speech style among Sabra Israelis (Katriel, 1986; see also the following collection, Katriel, 1991) persuasively demonstrated how a speech style both affords and captures a cultural style of communication which in turn indexes cultural identity and self-views of the relationship between communication and authenticity. Incorporating multiple types of data (collected in multiple sites), the study captured a cultural epoch through the way speakers interacted. Later studies were able to document the *decline of that Dugri speech style*, which again captures significant historical sociocultural changes through styles of speech and related social interaction.

Philipsen's (1975) Speech Code Theory (SCT), too, was a propelling factor in the widespread use of EoC within communication studies. Philipsen developed the SCT when researching Teamsterville—a pseudonym for a White, working-class Chicago neighborhood he studied in the 1960s. SCT addressed the relations between culture and communication and set the stage for a new turn in EoC research in communication studies. According to Philipsen (1975), 'Talk is not everywhere valued equally' (p. 13), and he therefore asks how the *value of speech* (and communicative practices more generally) is established, over and above the communicative function or the content themselves. As with Katriel's (1986) study of the Durgi speech style of Israeli talk, so, in 'speaking like a man' in Teamsterville, a style of esteemed talk was revealed, one that indexes sociocultural values concerning gender and chauvinism.

Carbaugh's (1988, 2007) Cultural Discourse Theory (CuDA) offers further development, stressing the cultural dimensions of communication, holding that culture and communication are mutually constitutive. Communication and communicative practices are seen as resources for participation in social interaction, where the operative emphasis is on 'communication practice' as a key term for analysis. Due to its emphasis on cultural dimensions of interaction and exchange, CuDA has been usefully applied to events and contexts in which different cultural practices of communication are interacting. In such 'ethnographies of hybridity', the cross-cultural circulation, dissemination, replication, and adaptions of culturally patterned speech and discourse take place, such as in the case of English public speaking as taught and received in China (Boromisza-Habashi & Fang, 2023).

These developments of EoC represent fruitful directions in the field of communication studies, stressing the culture-language and culture-communication nexuses through up-close examination. They suggest viewing communication as culturally situated and embodied practices, involving participants' (reflexive) meanings, and offering the language-communication nexus as a 'radically coded and cultural practice' (Carbaugh & Boromisza-Habashi, 2015, p. 551). This has propelled research in various subfields of communication studies, including intercultural, interpersonal, and organizational communication.

The SPEAKING Model

EoC's methodological component, which contributed to its attractiveness and prolific use, is Hymes' (1974) well-known SPEAKING acronym (sometimes written as S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G.). It is used as a memory aid that includes eight elements, which are founded on Jakobson's (1960) six-part model of a communication system. It should be considered as a helpful guideline, of which elements can be employed separately, rather than as a 'fixed' method of inquiry. The strength of these guidelines lies in bringing theoretical dimensions to the practical outline of a research approach. The eight elements are succinctly described below (for more detail see Johnstone & Marcellino, 2010, and for applications see Dori-Hacohen, 2012; Zand-Vakili et al., 2012):

i. *Setting* or Scene concerns the physical, cultural, and psychological aspects of the communication environment that is being studied.
ii. *Participants* and participant identities include the social roles, categories, and positionalities that are being performed (gender, authority, social status, relationships between participants, and so on). Participation is not viewed as an a-priori given, or predetermined, but as a processual, practical, and emergent phenomenon (see Noy, 2016, on how museum visitors establish relevant and situated identities, roles, authorities, and expertise, rough writing in museum comment books).

iii. *Ends* concern the goals and outcomes of the communicative events being studied, and of the individual participants and organizations. They imply that behavior is often purposeful (or 'functional'; Jakobson, 1960), or that it is thus viewed by participants.
iv. *Act* sequence and act topic concern the structure and unfolding of communication as well as of the topics and themes that are being communicated.
v. *Key* or tone considers how communication is framed. Although crucial for making sense of the message, the *Key* has not been easy to decipher and to explicitly address in analysis.
vi. *Instrumentalities* capture the linguistic code, such as dialect or modes of signification (indexicality, iconicity, and more). Instrumentalities also address the channel through which communication is established (face-to-face interaction, and so on).
vii. *Norms* refer to common and accepted rules of interaction and interpretation, sensitizing researchers to the existence of formal and informal standards (and to their transgressions).
viii. *Genre* addresses the stylistic type of communicative events and actions.

Borrowing from Bakhtin, Hymes (1972) observed that 'all speech has formal characteristics of some sort as manifestation of genres' (p. 65). In actual exchange, genres often intersect intertextually and interdiscursively, amounting to hybrid and multimodal texts. Moreover, genre has increasingly come to be seen more as encompassing texts' interactional affordances (and the shaping of participatory design) and less as pertaining to the structural/formal attributes of texts.

Conclusion and Future Directions

EoC's continuous dynamic and synergic employment across fields and disciplines suggests potential future contributions. One such direction concerns the application of EoC to digital environments. In a call addressing future EoC studies, Katriel (2015) brings together linguistic anthropology and communication studies to point at emergent processes of encoding in new media contexts. The call proposed looking diachronically and in a renewed manner at typical EoC concepts, such as *Settings*, which could allow the examination of how new codes emerge through new encoding processes in new environments. Katriel's (2015) call follows linguistic anthropologists Manning and Gershon (2014), who inquire into new semiotics and materialities relating to digital media. Changing socio-technological environments allow different codes to emerge and it is productive to 'think with' in terms of what amounts to a 'new code' (and to 'new' and to 'code' separately), and when can new codes be socio-technologically realized. Katriel (2015) observes that meaning is 'precoded' when it is 'not yet significant semiotically' (p. 457). Hence one question that EoC can address is how new codes, semiotic practices, and norms in various new settings assume meaning for their users (and by them), and how they surface into meaningfulness in newer media environments. "Can a theoretical recognition of the temporally anchored, potentially transformative, precoded moments of engagement with new media be integrated into current dematerialized code-based approaches to communication within the EC?" asks Katriel (2015, p. 458).

Manning and Gershon (2014) conceptualize three research foci concerning the interrelations between meaning and media (materiality/technology): entextualization, participant structure, and remediation. Consider participation structure/framework, where 'the medium will influence who can be the author of a statement, how many people can be the author, as well as who is likely to be considered the author' (p. 7). This opens a space for exploring new constellations of authorship(s) and recipiency structures in as-yet-unfamiliar settings (or *Settings*).

Furthermore, the relations between materiality, technology and participation formats are not predetermined. New media settings, and new forms and formats of mediation, may shed new light on 'older' familiar technologies, and alternatively, new(er) forms of (re)mediation take their time in shaping stabilized forms and norms of participation, which may (only) then be 'named'. Such negotiations of socio-technological participation formats, and with them the emergence of codes and perhaps their social stabilization may in turn create, as Katriel (2015) observed, 'new "named" forms of writing such as blogging, tweeting and texting, and new interrelations between oral and written codes' (p. 457). They may also create new ways through which shifts between different participatory statuses/positionalities are performed and communicated.

The application of EoC to emerging digital settings poses several challenges, including the need to be ethnographically familiar with such environments, containing dimensions as interactional affordances, design attributes, algorithmic preferences, and so on, which may affect emerging structures of interaction, participation and meaning-making. Consider the works of Navon and Noy (2023) and Schreiber & Noy (in review), which show how the interactional affordances of Facebook's or Google Maps' different sub-platforms (pages, groups, profile, in the former, and Google Maps Review, in the latter), distinctly shape different types of interactions, genres and social dynamics. These dimensions influence what can be communicated, by whom and to whom, and the interrelations between the platform's technological communication affordances and users' creativity and gender discourse (posts, messages, reviews, etc.). This touches on potential EoC contributions to platform studies.

EoC-inspired studies of emerging encoding processes and norms, and of digital communication more broadly, are further complicated by the constantly evolving features of these environments (*Settings*), which are modified to varying degrees by the organization that manages them. Digital environments are also challenging for EoC studies, because there are often several basic elements in such *Settings* that remain unknown to users and researchers, such as algorithmic preferences.

A second scene for EoC's potential contribution concerns the early shift from an emphasis on speaking (1962) to an emphasis on communication more broadly (1964). The consequences of this expansion have not been exhausted in relation to non-verbal

interactions and modes and means of communication, and in relation to interactions with/by non-human participants (actors/actants). These may range from the rampant use of emojis, stickers, and nonverbal memes in digital environments, to interspecies and interspecific interactions, to interactions with artificial intelligence (such as ChatGPT). Decentering anthropocentrism may likely bring about richer contributions from EoC studies. The COVID-19 pandemic (Tate, 2022), the pressing need in communication studies to address environment and sustainability issues, and the recent AI hype—all offer rich data for research.

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