16 An Ethnographic Approach to Communication Studies

GERRY PHILIPSEN

Ethnography, which combines the Greek word elements *ethno-* ("a tribe, race, or nation") and *-graphos* ("something written down"), refers to a written report about a people. Such writings have long been a resource for learning about cultures and societies, but recently many scholars in the social sciences, including a few in the communication discipline, have applied the practice of ethnography to the study of communication. These scholars do fieldwork summarized in descriptive reports and they use the accumulated body of ethnographic data to generate, test, and refine theories of communication. In this chapter I essay briefly this approach by turning, first, to an assumptive foundation that motivates its use in communication study; second, to some of the fundamental theoretical problems to which ethnographic study of communication is addressed; third, to the defining features of ethnography; and, in conclusion, to how the ethnographic relates to the neopositivistic and interpretive approaches to communication study.

The Axiom of Particularity

The ethnographic approach builds its foundation upon, and draws its research agenda from, a fundamental axiom, that the efficacious resources for creating shared meaning and motivating coordinated action vary across social groups. This axiom is explicated here by positing four constituent assumptions.

First is the assumption of communicative meaning: In general, and in particular instances, interlocutors establish, through their actions and interpretations of actions, a sense of shared meaning, such that interlocutors orient to each other and each other's acts as if they expressed a common sense. Assumption one points to an assumed fact, that is, that when people communicate (i.e., produce messages so as to create an intended meaning) there are moments in which communication effectiveness is achieved (i.e., that B grasps A's intention). The assumption does not say that intended meanings are always interpreted as the sender would have

them to be understood, nor does it say that an exact correspondence is ever achieved—the assumption is mute on those points. It does say that it does happen, at least on occasion, that interlocutors achieve a sense of shared meaning.

If, for example, one observes the *Phil Donahue Show*, a popular American television show of the "talk show" variety, or if one were to elicit the sense made of the talk on the show by those viewing it on television, one could note the use of such words as *sharing*, *communication*, and *honesty* (see Katriel & Philipsen, 1981). One could also note that interlocutors orient to those words as making a particular, knowable sense, and one could, furthermore, explicate what that sense is, for these interlocutors. Assumption one points to the assumed fact that such particular shared sense is, on occasion, achieved. A second example is drawn from the speech community labeled "Teamsterville," a community of blue-collar, white Americans on the near south side of Chicago, Illinois (Philipsen, 1975, 1976, 1986). In this community, one frequently hears statements about the "nationality" or "race" of persons and about the "neighborhood," "street," and "corner." These statements have a particular, knowable sense to those who interpret them (Philipsen, 1986). Assumption one posits the fact of such a sense of shared meaning among interlocutors.

Second is the assumption of coordinated action: In general, and in particular instances, interlocutors coordinate their lines of action in such a way that potentially divergent actions fit together into what the interlocutors perceive to be a harmonious pattern. There is order, or at least what the participants sense to be order, in social life. This order consists of the fitting together of potentially divergent lines of action. Social life presents individuals with seemingly limitless occasions on which there are diverse possibilities for conduct, for example, whether to speak or remain silent, whether to speak in an informal versus a formal style, whether to initiate, or having initiated, whether to escalate or terminate, social bonding episodes, and so forth. Assumption two points to the fact that such accomplishments are not random but reflect intentional action on the part of interlocutors. Again, not all of social life necessarily is coordinated action; assumption two posits the assumed fact of its occasional occurrence.

Among the Quakers in seventeenth-century England, for example, worship services were highly structured in terms of speech versus silence. "Silence," placed in quotation marks to denote its status as a native symbolic concept, refers, for the Quakers, not merely to the absence of speech but to a symbolic action, a way of "waiting upon the Lord" and thus a way of acting in the public occasion of the worship service. The Quaker services were tightly ordered in terms of occasional moments of speaking and long periods of "silence." The alternation between speech and "silence" represents an intricate fitting together of acts by the several people present. For the participants, the Quaker meeting was an artfully accomplished organization of symbolic actions.

Third is the assumption of particularity in meaning and action: The particular communicative meanings that are created and the particular patterns of conduct that are enacted vary across particular communities. Assumption three posits dif-

ferences in the spoken life of different communities. It says that to participate in the spoken life of, for example, the Teamstervillers or the seventeenth-century Quakers is, in each case, to live in a world of meaning and action that is substantively different from the others. The particular sense that is made and the particular routines that are enacted are culture-specific. The empirical literature on the ethnography of communication constitutes a substantial body of data that supports this assumption (see Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986).

Fourth is the assumption of cultural particularity: In every interacting group or community, there is a community-specific system of resources for making shared sense and for organizing coordinated action. Assumptions one through three posit structure and variation in public conduct and meanings. Assumption four posits a basis for explaining the facts referred to in assumptions one through three, in that it points to one class of resource available for sense-making and social coordination, that is, to cultural meanings and cultural rules. Culture, that is, a historically transmitted system of symbols, meanings, premises, routines, procedures, and rules, is *sui generis*. For example, in the traditional Hebrew culture there is no concept of close, supportive, open speech, as there is in American culture, as reflected in the English language term *communication* used in much American speech about intimate life (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981). There is in Israeli culture a conception of social cohesion and social crystallization pertaining to an elementary school class as tagged lexically by the Hebrew term *gibush* (Katriel & Nesher, 1986); there is no corresponding concept in American culture or term in American English. These are examples of the distinctiveness, across systems, of the said and the sayable. The literature on personal address provides many examples at the levels both of meaning potential and of rules: Every known language has a distinctive system of resources (items and devices) for addressing another person and for signaling social meanings in the act of address, as well as a distinctive system of rules for employing the available resources (Philipsen & Huspek, 1985).

If communicative meaning and conduct are systematic, then they are amenable to systematic study. If the meanings and patterns of communicative activity vary cross-culturally, then they must be discovered in particular cases, and not assumed, and the fact of such variability must be accounted for, theoretically, in modeling and explaining human communication.

The Research Agenda

Given the axiom of particularity, certain problems should be given a prominent place on the agenda of communication research. Three such research problems are identified here: (1) developing a discovery model (descriptive framework) for understanding distinctive systems of communicative resources, (2) delineating the nature and scope of cultural variation in communicative conduct, and (3) ascertaining relationship(s) between culture and communication conduct.

Developing a Descriptive Model for Culturally Distinctive Communicative Resources

There is a principle, long honored in much neopositivistic social science, that a model for describing a phenomenon is preliminary to the real work of theory, that is, formulating testable relationships among variables (Zetterberg, 1965). The ethnographic approach to communication study, grounded in the axiom of particularity, embraces this principle to the degree that there are cross-cultural universals in communicative behavior that can be demonstrated empirically. The ethnographic approach, however, gives priority to another kind of theorizing, one that makes a descriptive model the test and rationale of scientific progress. This priority is manifested in a concern to develop a theory of description, a parsimonious, testable statement of the necessary and sufficient procedures and categories for describing the particularities of any given communicative system.

In the ethnography of communication, as a named enterprise formulated by Dell Hymes, a descriptive framework has been proposed and then revised in the light of new empirical data (Hymes, 1962, 1964, 1967, 1972). The framework provides a limited number of general categories that can be used to state the particular communication patterns and resources in any human community. The goal is to develop an acontextual format for discovering, describing, and comparatively analyzing particular communication patterns and distinctive cases. The intent is that ethnographies of communication not only be guided by the framework but also that they provide data to use in revising and elaborating it—thus advances in the descriptive model are empirically grounded, theoretical advances.

The descriptive model, which has governed most empirical work in the ethnography of communication, has been revised extensively in the light of empirical work. For example, a comparison of the 1962 and 1972 statements of the model reveal the following changes reflected in the later version: (a) the addition of social units, including speech network and speech field subsumed under the earlier heading speech community; (b) an increase in the number of components of communicative events, from seven to sixteen; (c) the addition of a situational unit, so that speech situation subsumed the two categories speech situation and speech act, (d) a typology of communal styles in cultural (i.e., communal) communication; (e) a typology for characterizing societies as to the quantitative and qualitative importance of communication; (f) formalized procedures for rule-discovery and rule-statement; and (g) a dynamic or interactional model for speech behavior as communicative interaction. Hymes claimed that such changes were motivated by systematic analysis of extant fieldwork, but this claim is not explicitly documented. Certainly, the ideal for the ethnography of communication as an enterprise is that the framework be systematically changed through empirically warranted revisions and development.

Much of the work of ethnographers of communication within the communication discipline has been devoted to experimenting with and testing, in practice,

methods and formats for discovering and stating cultural rules and meanings. See, for example, Philipsen (1972, 1975, 1986), Carbaugh (in press), Katriel (1986), and Katriel and Philipsen (1981).

Delineating the Nature and Scope of Cultural Variation in Communicative Conduct

Several universalist theses about communicative behavior and conduct have been proposed. These posit a universal force, mechanism, or tendency that shapes communication behavior. For example:

—Searle (1976) has posited a finite number of actions that can be performed in speech (speech acts), expressed in an elegant classification scheme that is universal in its intent.

—Berger and Calabrese (1975) posit a universal motivation to reduce uncertainty in social relationships, a force that is manifested in the number and content of messages exchanged in interacting dyads.

—Cushman and his associates (Cushman & Florence, 1974) have posited that the self-concept is a "generative mechanism," that is, that it is the driving force of human interpretation and action, and the source of message content.

—Brown and Levinson (1978) have advanced the claim, grounded in a formalization of Goffman's "face-work" model and in the analysis of three languages, that face wants finely condition the linguistic and kinesic detail in message construction and the interpretations given to messages; they claim they have located a universal motive, the desire to maintain "face," which takes priority over other motives in social interaction.

—Universal rules of conversational sequencing have been proposed by Schegloff (1972) and his associates (see also Sanders, 1986, for a significant development of this approach).

The view, or hearing, from ethnography is that each of these universalist theses is open to question on theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, an ethnographic position would emphasize the particularity of meanings, patterns, functions, motives, and principles of interpretation governing communicative conduct. Empirically, societies have been studied in which the universal scheme (of illocutionary acts) was found to be inadequate to the particularities of the case, or in which the universal motive or principle (uncertainty reduction, self-concept realization, face-work, conversational sequencing, and so on) has been found to be less salient or less compelling than other motives or principles. For example, Rosaldo (1982) reports a case in which Searle's classification scheme proves to be inadequate cross-culturally; Basso (1970) provides a case in which hypotheses derived from uncertainty reduction theory would not be confirmed; Philipsen (1975, 1976) describes a society in which self-concept theory would have relatively little predictive power when self-concept is pitted against the cultural norms as

a generative mechanism; Katriel (1986) presents an Israeli case that seriously questions the universal applicability of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (see also Fitch, 1986, for a review of the theory of universals in politeness); and the ethnographic evidence suggests that some hypotheses about conversational sequencing do not withstand cross-cultural test (Reisman, 1974).

The universalist theses described above have not been definitively disconfirmed by ethnographic data, but these data present certain empirical challenges to the universalist claims. The point is not that something is finished, but that the ethnographic data and the universalist claims, when juxtaposed, provide rich materials for dialogue, which can, conceivably, yield more refined formulations of extant theory. In the other direction, the universalist theses are vitally important as focusing themes (and hypotheses) for ethnographic fieldwork. One of the most promising areas of communication research in the immediate future should be the examination of universalist theses in the light of cross-cultural data as well as the focusing of cross-cultural studies in the terms of the universality theses. The fruit of such inquiry should be a more precise specification than heretofore available of the nature and scope of cultural variation in communication. Such a specification, one that requires an interdependent relationship between ethnographic and neopositivistic communication scholars, could prove invaluable to the development of communication theory.

Ascertaining Relationships Between Culture and Communication

Given the axiom of particularity, which posits the existence of cultural resources for communication (meanings and rules), a fundamental question emerges: What is the relationship, if any, between culture and communicative conduct. With regard to the "force" of both norms and systems of meanings, various strong and weak theses have been advanced, and a crucial area of research is to test and develop these theses.

A now-classic, and seemingly enduring, approach to the relation of norms to conduct is what I call the "normative force" thesis. This thesis posits that, given high crystallization (consensus with a community) and intensity (degree to which members of a community think a norm is important enough that they will sanction its violation), and given individual knowledge, skill, and opportunity to follow the norms, patterns of action in a particular social world will reflect the preferences embodied in the normative system. From this view, norms are an analyst's resource for predicting, explaining, and controlling human action.

The normative force thesis enjoys considerable acceptance and support among social scientists (see Axelrod, 1986), but it has been subjected to a sustained critique in several quarters. Among the objections are that (a) much behavior does not conform to the norms that purportedly govern it; (b) opposing norms can be applied in the same situation, yielding opposing predictions; (c) the scope of norms is never definitive or permanent (they have an "open texture"); and (d) norms are human creations and thus can be resisted and changed by humans.

An important area of research is the exploration of alternative theses about the relation of norms to communicative conduct. One attractive alternative is what I call the discursive force thesis, which is that, given a norm, one can predict, explain, and control the form of discourse about the moral status of conduct. This thesis says, essentially, that when one member of a speech community grounds an evaluation of conduct in a community norm, there are specified ways in which the ensuing discourse will unfold, specifically, that there will be a repair, an argument about the scope of the norm, or an appeal to negotiate the norm's continuing force. Another attractive alternative is that proposed by Bilmes (1976), that norms are a part of culture (the interpretive system) and thus function as interpretive, rather than exclusively as guiding or controlling, resources—that is, they are used to make sense of conduct but not necessarily as rules that deterministically govern conduct.

As with norms, so with culture, their relationship to communicative conduct is a topic open to investigation. The statement that culture is communication is, of course, tautologous, and does not speak to the relationship between these two analytically distinct phenomena. The question is this: What is (are) the relation(s) between culture and communicative conduct?

One answer to the question posits a deterministic relationship. Extending the Sapir-Whorf linguistic determinism thesis to culture, one can posit that culture—as a system of symbols and meanings—determines cognition and communication. This would be a strong view of the culture-communication relation, one that posits that a particular culture absolutely determines cognition (e.g., perception and memory) and communication (i.e., what is and can be said and meant among a group of culture-sharing interlocutors). The empirical and conceptual work, of the past 25 years, on the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf thesis casts this deterministic view in a very unfavorable light. Alternative theses posit an important but weaker role for culture, such as that cultures enable and constrain what can be communicated, but do not absolutely determine or limit communication. Considerable psycholinguistic as well as ethnographic data support such a position.

With regard to both the norm-conduct and the culture-conduct relationships, we have only begun to explore what might be hypothesized and to test what hypotheses are available. Research that manipulates variables and that analyzes quantitatively the linkages among variables, including research conducted under laboratory conditions, will play a vital role in generating insights and hypotheses and also in refining, testing, and qualifying the scope of hypotheses generated and tested outside of ethnography. Ethnographies should prove indispensable in the discovery and evaluation of sound theories in this domain, in that they provide practical, contextually sensitive tests that frequently reveal aspects of the communication process not ordinarily detected in the situation of laboratory observation, closed measurement, and manipulation of variables. And the reality of spoken life frequently is more variegated, more surprising, than any of us anticipates prior to an extended field experience in some particular speech community. Again, this is an area in which the results obtained using diverse research

styles and methods can profitably be used, although not necessarily mixed within given studies.

In summary, three crucial research problems have been identified—the formulation of an empirically grounded model of cultural description, the cross-cultural empirical testing of universalist hypotheses about communication, and the development and evaluation of theories linking culture to communicative conduct. These three themes should have a high priority on the research agenda in cultural studies of communication, and the success with which they are developed should be directly tied to the degree with which ethnographic data and thinking are brought into dialogue with data and theory from other quarters.

Ethnography as Method

I have left discussion of what ethnography is until last to emphasize that the ethnographic approach is not a method chasing a subject, but a method selected because of its appropriateness to a specified research agenda.

Recently it has become commonplace to include a wide range of studies under the rubric *ethnography*, as the term has become used beyond its native anthropology. My conception is that ethnography is not merely fieldwork, is not ethnomethodology (with which it is sometimes equated), is not exclusively qualitative with no counting involved, is not necessarily interpretive, is not unfocused observation, and is not atheoretical. What, then, is it? I believe it is research that is *descriptive, cultural, focused, comparative*, and *theoretical*.

First, an ethnography is a description, a written report about a particular people. In writing such a report the ethnographer ordinarily has spent many months or years living among and observing a particular people, participating in their life, talking with them, and recording observations and interpretations of their communicative conduct. At Washington, for example, our doctoral students who do an ethnographic dissertation spend from nine months to one year or more in full-time fieldwork; in cases where this involves work in a language other than English, our students have four or more years of formal training in the local language as well as training in linguistic transcription and analysis.

Second, an ethnography reports a people's particularity, that is, what, essentially, characterizes this people as well as what differentiates them from other peoples. In this regard, the ethnographer is particularly concerned with getting to the heart of a people's meanings, premises, and rules (here I follow Geertz, 1973, p. 89). For the ethnographer of communication, this concern is expressed in the search for a culturally distinctive pattern of communication as it is rooted in a distinctive way of life—one term used to denote such a pattern is *ways of speaking*, with *speaking* meant to stand for speech as well as other structured modes of symbolic conduct (Hymes, 1974). The emphasis on culture differentiates ethnography from, for example, ethnomethodology, the latter being concerned with transcultural, universal ways of making sense, and from all qualitative