

Dell Hymes—S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G.

Downloaded from **Ethnography of Communication**

<http://www.cios.org/encyclopedia/ethnography/index.htm>

April 30, 2012

This site includes a full lesson for learning about, and applying this model to analyze communication.

Theoretical Overview

Dell Hymes is considered by many to be the founder of the area known as Ethnography of Communication. In 1962 he proposed "ethnography of speaking" as a way to study how people talked. Later the name was changed to include other symbolic means of expression and called ethnography of communication.

One of his goals was to create a theory that helped researchers study language use in specific contexts (at that time, some researchers in the field of Linguistics were trying to study language by itself, removed from the times and places people talked). Hymes thought that by looking at how people actually *use* language, patterns could be discovered that otherwise would not be by just looking at the words themselves.

Hymes (1974) states that, "the starting point is the ethnographic analysis of the communication conduct of a community" (p. 9). Communication conduct is what people do when they communicate with each other. He set out to show that researchers could use his methods to study this communication (talk) systematically.

To study the communication of a particular culture, Hymes proposed basic units that indicate which area of the culture one is most interested in examining. He set forth the following 6 units: speech community, speech situation, speech event, communicative act, communicative style, and ways of speaking.

1. The primary unit, **speech community**, follows from the description of linguistic community proposed by John Gumperz (1962). A speech community is comprised of a group of people that often use common signs. Because they communicate in a particular way, they are different from other groups. Hymes (1972) also defined a speech community as people who share "rules" for when and how to speak (p. 54). In 1974, he said that for someone to be counted as a member of a speech community, he or she must share at least one "way of speaking" with others. Hymes later includes the meanings of what people say. For instance, users of a particular website may be considered a speech community if they share particular rules for speaking online. Or, perhaps those who ride skateboards may be considered a speech community if the way they communicate is distinct from how those who do not ride skateboards communicate.

S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G.: A research tool

After deciding upon one of the six basic units to observe (see [Theoretical Overview](#): a speech community, situation, event, act, style or way of speaking) a researcher can then proceed to analyze it by using one of the tools that Hymes developed. These tools can be remembered easily by thinking about the word, S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. By using the tools of S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G., a researcher opens up the potential meanings of a speech community or by examining these smaller units. Your interests should help you choose which of these tools will help you with your analysis.

S. The first letter ("S") designates **Situation**, which includes both the scene and the setting. This is where the activities are taking place and the overall scene in which they are a part.

P. The second refers to the **Participants** involved. This area includes the people present and the roles they play, or the relationships they have with other participants.

E. Next, the **Ends** or goals of communication can be studied.

A. Acts, or speech acts include both form and content. That is, any action can be considered a communicative action if it conveys meaning to the participants.

K. One can also choose to focus upon the **Key** or tone of speech. How the speech sounds or was delivered.

I. Instrumentality or the channel through which communication flows can be examined.

N. The **Norms** of communication or the rules guiding talk and its interpretation can reveal meaning.

G. Finally, one can look at cultural or traditional speech **Genres**, such as proverbs, apologies, prayers, small talk, problem talk, etc.

By using these tools (S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G.) to analyze one unit, such as particular speech community, a researcher can come to learn more about how people communicate and how that communication is often patterned.

A researcher does not need to use all the units and tools every time he or she sets out to look at a speech community. It depends upon the types of questions that the researcher is interested in asking as to what units and tools he or she will choose. For example, if you are interested in questions of identity -- How can you tell who is a member and what does it mean to be a member of this group? -- then you can focus on the "P.A.S." components of the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. tools. You would ask, who the participants ("P") are and how their actions ("A") help to define their identity as a group member in particular situations ("S").

Hymes, Dell. *Foundations of Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1974.

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