

Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality: Toward an Understanding of Voice by Dell Hymes. London, UK and Bristol, PA : Taylor & Francis (Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education series), 1996. Pp. xiv+258pp.

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The view of language as inseparable from its speakers and from its context has always been present in linguistics, but it has not always been popular. When the Chomskian revolution in the 60's swept away the achievements of the structuralists (compromised by their theoretical allegiance with Skinnerian behaviorism), graduate students of child language acquisition were advised against mentioning in their dissertation the child as an active learner, or the family and the community as the people whose language the child was learning. With a vantage point from the present situation in the field, *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality* gives a historical perspective on the study of situated language use since the 1970's, reaffirming the theoretical and political value of linguistic studies outside of the generative grammar movement. Dell Hymes takes a strong and original stance, viewing social science as a mediating practice, as activism and intervention, and social scientists as practitioners, as well as researchers.

The book is a collection of articles written at different times and for different occasions. They are divided into three thematic parts: Part I, Ethnography; Part II, Linguistics; and Part III, Narrative and Inequality. In "What is Ethnography" (Chapter 1, Part I), Hymes contrasts ethnography as a mode of research with experimental design and quantitative measurement methods. Employing participation and observation, "comprehensive" ethnography of the early days (1850's) was used by L. H. Morgan to record kinship terminology of the Iroquois Indians. Two aspects of Morgan's work laid the foundation of contemporary ethnography as an essential tool for research: his development of contrastive insight, and his combined quest for specific information and general interpretation.

"Comprehensive" ethnography and "topic-oriented" ethnography led to significant advances in the understanding of culture and prepared the way for "hypothesis-oriented" ethnography, which Hymes believes to be the next stage in the evolution of the field. Using this conceptual paradigm Hymes proposes to analyze schooling in America the way anthropologists have studied kinship systems, i.e. by constructing a typology. His goal is to determine what kinds of schools there are. Such a typology must be useful for a certain purpose, i.e. for research on literacy. As a consequence, constructing such a typology is a necessarily dialectical, feedback process. The initial questions may change during the course of

inquiry—a revolutionary concept for traditional science—in this way establishing the scientific validity of the method. This chapter makes evident the significant contribution that ethnography brings to research in education.

Chapter Two, “Educational Ethnology,” brings to attention the issues that ethnography alone may have left unexamined. The suggestion made in Chapter One, that ethnography can be relevant for research on education, resurfaces in this chapter: The school system in America can be understood through the same methods used to study kinship structures around the world. Hymes criticizes the research view of schools as merely settings for the interaction of recurrent variables and regrets the lack of cumulative, longitudinal studies of individual schools or school systems in educational research. He calls for a comparative perspective, together with a knowledge of sociocultural context, to be brought into the analysis of schooling in America. In this sense, according to Hymes, the “ethnological dimension links anthropology of education with social history, through the ways in which larger forces for socialization, institutionalization, reproduction of an existing order, are expressed and interpreted in specific settings” (p. 19). This link is not only a theoretical notion—it brings with it the dimension of social usefulness of the research to the school site and to those studied, and the notion that there has to be sustained cooperation between the researchers and the researched. As in many other places throughout the book, Hymes brings in the political implications of scientific investigation. In a democratic society, he writes, there can not be a division of “those who know and those who are known” (p. 21).

In Chapter Three, “Speech and Language: On the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Speakers,” Hymes examines the sources of inequality in the way linguistic resources are distributed in society. His point of departure is a criticism of Chomsky’s Russel lectures, given in 1971. In contrast to Chomsky, Hymes views language as a human problem, which can be fruitfully analyzed along four broad dimensions: diversity, medium, structure and function. Writing on the first of these dimensions, “diversity,” Hymes questions the adequacy of such concepts as “speech community,” “mutual intelligibility,” and “the English language.” He calls for thinking of a community as possessing not a single language, but a repertoire of ways of speaking, speech styles with corresponding contexts of discourse and relations of appropriateness. In his analysis of the next dimension, “the medium of language,” Hymes discusses the relationship between speech and writing, describing both as modes of action, as one or another resource within the communicative repertoire. He then examines the communicative and social consequences for a choice of medium in a particular community, with its norms for performance and interpretation. Within Hymes’ discussion of the four dimensions of language, the section entitled “Overcoming the Structure of Language” is the most theoretically original and challenging in the book. Here he quotes a multitude of studies which may impress even the most erudite reader. He credits Whorf (who referred to the necessary organization of speaking as “a fashion of speaking”) with anticipating the sociolinguistic concept of “ways of speaking” and gives an extensive

critique of the theories of Basil Bernstein and Jurgen Habermas.

Chapter 4 reflects the author's political stance as early as its title: "Report from an Underdeveloped Country: Toward Linguistic Competence in the United States." This chapter originated as a lecture given in Amsterdam in 1975, and later published there, hence the apparent spatial disjuncture of the title. It would certainly have had an even more sarcastic and poignant tone had it been directed to an audience in the US: a living illustration of language in context. However, it is now presented to an American audience, which has to bear the consequences of living in a country called "underdeveloped" by the author. Why such a claim? Hymes argues that "with regard to knowledge of itself in terms of language the United States remains a largely underdeveloped country." In connection with this lack of linguistic self-knowledge, Hymes introduces a concept of voice through the notion of negative and positive freedom. If negative freedom is "the freedom from denial of opportunity due to something linguistic, whether in speaking or reading and writing," and positive freedom is "the freedom for satisfaction in the use of language," then the two kinds of freedom are united in the concept of voice: "freedom to have one's voice heard, freedom to develop a voice worth hearing" (p. 64). Unfortunately, despite the volume's subtitle "Toward an Understanding of Voice," Hymes fails to elaborate on this important concept.

Hymes offers a remedial solution to the language situation in the US by identifying five tasks for current researchers of language and culture. He relates these tasks to social issues, discussing varieties of Indian English, Spanish, Black English, and Hawaiian Creole English; ethnic identities, class, age, gender; classroom interaction and Goffman's work on politeness; and politics of bilingual education and cultural hegemony through language, to name only a few. Addressing one task, the "Critique of Sociology," he provides another analysis of Bernstein's and Habermas' work, and under "Critique of Linguistics," he takes issue with Chomsky's theoretical approach. In "Reshaping the Study of Language," (task 5), Hymes looks into the future with hope for "the organization of language in discourse" as the new frontier of research, a frontier to be explored through "contributions from many disciplines" (p. 99).

Part III, "Narrative and Inequality," constitutes one half of the book, and it has an autonomous position, both thematically and in terms of Hymes' more personal writing style ("Warm Springs Interlude," p. 117, is an example). It also has a dialogic quality as the author invokes, in the following six chapters, the voices and research of Courtney Cazden, M. Himley, William Labov, and Sarah Michaels. There is a profound richness to Hymes' theoretical views on narrative and its role in human life, which embraces such diverse ideas as ethnopoetics, narrative form as grammar of experience, and the recurrent patterns of narrative organization in different languages, as well as in narratives told by children. "Narrative may be a complementary, or alternative mode of thinking," Hymes writes (p. 114). Narrative in an educational situation can be seen as inferior to other, more cognitive, modes of thought, Hymes claims, as he goes on to ferret out the political and

personal consequences of such a view. "Few live healthy lives with no one to tell what has happened," (p. xii) he writes in the introduction, with the eloquence so characteristic of this latter part of the book. Yet, I found Hymes' analysis of the narratives he studies dissatisfying due to the emphasis on the mode of shaping and the shape itself, and to the analysis outside of the context in which the narratives were told and co-constructed by the participants of the interaction.

This book is an important and welcome contribution to the field of Applied Linguistics, for educators and researchers alike, as it articulates and addresses important practical, as well as theoretical, questions. The book is admirable in its political outspokenness. Hymes' own voice sounds loud and clear, and it will be heard.