The Theory of Speech Codes

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Introduction to Communication Studies

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In order to accurately define the meaning of the theory of speech codes, one must first understand the history and practices which helped in the development of the theory. This essay will give historical evidence and practical applications in reference to the ethnography of communication and the speech codes theory in order to assist the reader in understanding the theory of speech codes. In it, I plan to focus on the foundations set by Hymes and Burnstein, the work of Gerry Philipsen in the area of speech codes, and recent developments and studies that continue to develop the field in order to prove the importance of this theory.

Although over the past 30 years Gerry Philipsen has expanded and developed the theory of speech codes although he was not the first person to work with the ethnography of communication. In fact, Philipsen is included in what is referred to as the “third generation” of researchers in the field of the ethnography of communication. His work relied on the combined research of two men, Dell Hymes and Basil Bernstein (Philipsen 122).

Several years before the research and findings of Philipsen, the groundwork for the speech codes theory was set by Dell Hymes. Around the year 1962, Hymes observed the fact that the process of speech in its cultural context was being ignored by both anthropologists and linguists alike. After his discovery, Hymes decided not only to study the ethnography of speech but all aspects of communication, which included body language and self presentation.

The focus of Hymes’ research in the field on ethnography of communication is to “study the rules of speaking within a community or culture.” His objectives included “describing communicative patterns, norms, and expectancies regarding social rules for
participation within particular interaction contexts or communities” (Leahy 73). In other words, he tries to discover what the norms for involvement in a group are, how people should behave in a group, and what are the expected guidelines that people need to follow when in that group.

The ethnography of communication also assists in revealing “systems of social organization, role-relationships, values and beliefs, and patterns of knowledge and behaviors, which are historically transmitted in society” (Ojha 163). Hymes characterized the ethnography of speech as the circumstances and purposes in which speaking is used and what objectives are to be met through the use of speech. Working with scholars in linguistics, anthropology, and psychology, Hymes and this “first generation” of researchers began to examine the social and cultural establishments of language use at the University of Berkley.

Development of this theory continued into the “second generation” of researchers and spread from the east coast into the southern United States. For many years, the University of Texas at Austin was the headquarters for research in the ethnography of communication. However, as the “third generation” of researchers came into being, the focus of the research broadened to include more than just speech; it encompassed all of communication including that of the non-spoken (which will be covered in detail in more recent research) (Leeds-Hurwitz 85-86).

GERRY PHILIPSEN

Philipsen used this research along with the research of Basil Bernstein to formulate his theory of speech codes. According to Philipsen (1997), Burnstein:
demonstrated that, within the same society, there can exist different social groups or social classes whose communicative practices differ in important ways...[they] go beyond surface features in language use to differences in this coding principles that govern communicative conduct (Philipsen 122).

Since there are so many areas of cultural diversity in the world and each area has its own special communication processes, it is impossible to include every aspect of the speech codes theory into one paper. However, it is necessary to incorporate the work of the man who developed the theory, Gerry Phillipsen, and the research he conducted in order to make his discoveries.

In the early 1970’s Gerry Philipsen combined the concepts of Hymes and Burnstein in order to identify, study, and interpret his theory of speech codes. As mentioned earlier, Philipsen (1997) defines speech codes as being a “historically enacted, socially constructed system of terms, meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct” (Philipsen 126). However, this definition can give no justice to the intense applications of the theory which will be covered later in the paper.

Philipsen’s research, or the research dealing with the theory of speech codes, is motivated by “the desire to understand particular, socially constructed discursive worlds, such as those portrayed in... historical, spatial, and cultural sites in which human connections are accomplished.” Philipsen had this urge to uncover the communication processes in these different areas of the world.
TEAMSTERVILLE

The first research performed by Philipsen pertained to his carrier as a social group worker (but later evolved to a participant/observer status) on the south side of Chicago which he called “Teamsterville.” This neighborhood consisted of mostly white men and women who were of the lower to middle class and typically worked proletarian jobs. According to Philipsen’s article “Speaking ‘Like a Man’ in Teamsterville,” the norms of communication were not written down and could not be verbally declared by the members of the region, but they were tacitly known by the natives of the area. In this essay, Philipsen provides insightful and useful examples which may help to explain the theory of speech codes.

In one such example, Philipsen looked at the groups of men and boys in the Teamsterville community. With help from the interactional view, he came to the conclusion that when a relationship is symmetrical on levels such as age, sex, ethnicity, occupational status, and location of residence, there is bound to be a great amount of speech occurring. However, when a relationship is unbalanced and unequal (different age groups, sexes, ethnicities, and different employment situations) the amount and quality of communication will suffer. However, there are different levels of communication between different groups. Men of course will socialize with their significant others, their children, and people of importance such as potential and current employers or government officials; however this conversation will be a different quantity and quality of speaking than if these men were communicating with other males who shared the same beliefs and social statuses.
Philipsen used one example in which he entered a bar in Teamsterville, took a seat, and was approached by a local who asked what Philipsen’s nationality was. It makes sense that since Philipsen was not a “local” or typical visitor to the bar that the locals found his presence to be unique. Naturally the men who were usually present at the bar were curious about where he came from, for he did not know that he was not welcome in that particular bar. In certain regions of the world, it may seem as unacceptable behavior to confront another person in such an intrusive way, but for the men in Teamsterville, this form of communication behavior was normal.

In *Speaking ‘Like a Man’ in Teamsterville*, Philipsen presents several circumstances in which boys and men find speech to be inappropriate between males. In one such circumstance, an unnamed group worker was escorting a group of teenage boys from Teamsterville to a local town for a field trip. The boys, being curious of the outsider’s beliefs asked the social worker what he would do if a guy insulted his wife. The social worker responded by saying that he did not know. However, this did not satisfy the group of youngsters and they continued to prod him with questions on the subject. When the group worker made the comment that he would not resort to physical violence, but instead try to communicate with the man, the boys became rather upset and decided that they no longer wanted to go on the field trip.

At this point, I believed that the reasoning for their loss of interest in the field trip was simply because the young boys were stubborn and did not want to admit that the group worker was correct in his way of handling the situation. However, Philipsen goes on to say that the boys were afraid of having a supervisor who would not resort to physical violence if a situation arose in which protection was needed. In fact, he violated
the speech code that these boys were familiar with. Because the boys felt unsafe and
insecure, they were scared to go to such a rough town for the chance of attack would be
great. (15-16)

Another instance that demonstrates part of Philipsen’s (1975) work dealt with
defense of a female relative or significant other. This research states that in order to be “a
man,” a boy must defend the women in his life in a form other than communication,
which is seen as ineffective in Teamsterville. By a male not physically reacting to an
insult or injury to a woman who is important to him, several things could possibly occur:
“further attacks on himself, inferiority feelings for himself, and possible future attacks on
the girl” (Philipsen 18). After Phlipsen had completed his research in Teamsterville,
however, he was still not satisfied because there were so many other different
communities in the world with different codes of speech. He did find more gratification
after participating in a culture which he titled Nacirema.

- **NACIREMA**

The second part of Philipsen’s work dealt with an area which Philipsen felt more
comfortable and at home. He called this area in southern California the Nacirema
culture. For this study, Philipsen (1997) recorded conversations that families held at
dinner time in Nacirema. He then took the recordings and observed the communication
that occurred. For one, everyone in the household was given a fair opportunity to talk,
for this culture believed that every person had “something to contribute.” Secondly, there
were no distinctions in authority and no one, not even the parents, could interrupt the
conversation while somebody else was speaking. In Nacirema culture, speech is deemed
as a necessity when it comes to matters of equality and assists each member in expressing individuality:

For these Nacirema, speech is a way to express one’s psychological uniqueness… It is a means by which family members, for example, can manifest their equality and demonstrate that they pay little heed to differences in status.

The quote then goes on to say that these “practices and beliefs… would puzzle and offend a proper Teamsterviller” for communication is very important to the Nacirema culture while for the Teamstervillers it is seen as unimportant in most situations (Philipsen 129-130).

As Philipsen (1997) reviewed these recordings, he also was prompted to “search of the meaning of the term ‘communication,’” which was found to be a very important term in Nacirema speech about interpersonal life and interaction on different levels with other people. With help from his recent Nacirema research, Philipsen identified two clusters of speaking which varies the quality of communication. The first cluster is labeled the “communication” cluster and includes “communication, real communication, really talking, supportive communication, and open communication.” This cluster includes speaking that is deep, intuitive, and meaningful. The second group, which is simplistic and does not posses any real meaning, is classified as “mere talk” and includes “small talk, normal chit-chat, and mere talk” (130). However, through this research, Philipsen (1997) and his co-researches came up with a new definition of communication for the Nacirema culture; the new definition of communication became “close, open, supportive speech.” (Philipsen 131)
TEAMSTERVILLE VERSUS NACIREMA

To the Naciremas, communication was seen as a way to express individuality and uniqueness. In this culture, speaking was always encouraged and is seen as a way to contribute important information into conversations. However, in Teamsterville, speaking is almost always discouraged. Aside from talking with other male friends of similar statuses, family members, and authority figures, speech is rarely used. In many situations, Teamstervillers believed that communication could lead to serious trouble including physical attacks on themselves or people close to them.

Although Nacirema and Teamsterville are two specific cases, similar trends can be seen among all sorts of different cultures of the United States. However, there has since been much research performed in the field in which new and fascinating speech codes are always being uncovered. The research of Conquergood and Ojha are two additional cases in which new speech codes are being created in different cultures and under special circumstances.

RECENT APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY

Since Philipsen’s preliminary research in the 1970’s, there has been much additional research that has dealt with the area of speech codes. While researching Philipsen’s theory of speech codes, I had located and read many articles pertaining to further research in the field. Some articles were very broad and universal while others pertained to specific instances. I plan to present instances of both of these that can assist the population in general to better understand the speech codes in areas in which they may come across on a regular basis.
• HOMEBOYS AND HOODS

The first example of a fairly recent practical application that I found to be not only interesting but informative has to do with Conquergood’s research on “Homeboys and Hoods: Gang Communication and Cultural Space” which was done in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. Much of this research relates extremely well to Philipsen’s research on the speech codes theory.

When discussing gang relationships, it is just like discussing an entirely new culture. They have their own rules for semiotics which include items of clothing, hand symbols, and a different vocabulary. Conquergood states that for gangs’ terms such as “interpersonal and small group are inadequate” because they are conventional typologies of communication; the rules of these interactional communication practices are not the same rules that the groups typically follow. These gangs have their own sets of rules, regulations, and standards (Conquergood 24).

Since the speech codes theory deals with both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, it is important that both of these forms are identified in this particular study. These gangs have ways of presenting themselves that are unique to their particular group. Examples of non-verbal presentation include: “hand signs, color of clothing, tilt of a baseball cap, brand of tennis shoes and style of lacing, whistles, visual icons (both in graffiti murals and body tattoos), mode of crossing arms, and earrings” (Conquergood 26-27).

These non-verbal forms of communication are important for several reasons. One, they assist other members in the gang to recognize another person or people who may be in the same gang (gangs range from 6-1000+ members and it may become
difficult to recognize a person simply by his face). Secondly, graffiti may help in identifying the “turf” of a specific group or give the gang a place of common ground.

Verbal communication for gang members is also a unique form of communication to the homeboys. Conquergood also states in his article “Homeboys and Hoods” that:

The verbal communication of gangs is … coded in a variety of ways so that their meanings are camouflaged. Gangs draw richly on street slang, a class-marked discourse that already sets them apart from mainstream ‘respectability.’ In addition, they develop a special argot and set of shibboleths peculiar to gangs, with certain terms and phrases that circulate only within specific gangs (Conquergood 27).

Basically, Conquergood said that communication is coded by street slang so that only certain people can understand the language that is being used. The reason for this ‘coding’ is because of the need for privacy—so that personal matters having to do with the gang and that need to stay in the gang can.

Communication between the gang leaders and members is very important and is seen as the way to get things done. Conquergood cites one example in a gang charter:

If you don’t communicate effectively, you won’t lead effectively.

Leadership involves getting things done through people. How well you do this, this will be determined by your ability to communicate. You have to look upon communication as your most valuable asset (Conquergood 33).

I found this comment in the gang’s charter to be fascinating because they seem to take communication very seriously. This specific gang believes that communication is
essential to everyday life just like the people in the Nacirema culture although I had them pictured more like the Teamsterville community because of their closedness to others.

**HUMOR AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Another recent study was done by Ajay D. Ojha in 2000 titled “Humor: A Distinctive Way of Speaking That Can Crate Cultural Identity.” Basically, the paper focuses on a joke “that is common among Asian Indians and Asian Indian Americans about the cultural identity of both sides” (Ojha 2003). The basis of the paper focuses on two groups: Asian Indians born in India and have temporarily moved the United States and Asian Indian Americans who were born and live in the United States. The article attempts to explain why a similar joke between the two similar and yet different cultures exists and why living their lives in one area for so long changes their view on the other similar and yet different group.

Ojha (2003) goes on to tell about the joke: Asian Indians call Asian Indian Americans ‘ABCD’ (American Born Confused Desi (a Desi is a name person of Asian Indian decent)) while in turn Asian American Indians refer to Asian Indians as ‘FOB’s (Fresh Off the Boat). Both sections of the group are attempting to discriminate against people who have the same heritage as them but have grown up in a different region of the world. This article attempts to explain why a joke about one section of a culture may not be seen as funny to another section of the same culture.

According to Ojha (2003), these examples are “concretized ways of speaking within particular speech communities. Given that a speech community is socially constructed, a distinctive way of speaking will be an artifact of the speech community, which is based on their interaction in the community” (Ojha 172).
MY TAKE AND CONCLUSIONS ON THIS THEORY

Personally, I think that this theory makes complete and perfect sense. It is my belief that since there are so many different ethnic, religious, and generally unique cultures in the world, there are bound to be different communication practices throughout. Every group is different from every other one in one manner or another. The differences between people are what make the world such a unique and vast place. If every group acted, spoke, dressed, and presented themselves in the same way, there would be no diversity.

Why do people present themselves in a certain way? This I do not know. Does anybody know the exact reasons why they are who they are? What I do know, however, is that the people who you surround yourself with help to form different aspects of your being which include, to a large degree, both your spoken and non-verbal communication skills. A person’s environment builds who the person is; the people in the environment contribute ideas of fashion, language, values and many other ideas into a culture which aid in creating the environment in which others partake. In the instances of Teamsterville, Nacirema, “Homeboys and Hoods,” and Ojha’s research on humor in culture, all of the people involved are being influenced by the other people which they willingly select to be around.

In general, this theory does help to explain why people act the way that they do when they are with a specific group. It assists people in understanding how other cultures communicate and how and why they believe the things that they do. It makes us realize that “the role of language in society cannot be taken for granted” and is different in each and every culture. (Sherzer 1989) Through the study of speech codes, new information is
uncovered that attempts to understand the different cultures which people create and the people who create them.


