

## **NORMS OF INTERACTION AND INTERPRETATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO DISCOURSE IN A CATALAN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT**

JOSEP M. COTS  
*Universitat de Lleida*

### 1. *Introduction*

Being an instructor at a university means, among other things, forming part of a social group whose members inter-relate through different types of encounters which constitute the ordinary life of the institution. In each of these encounters the participants are expected to adopt a specific 'way of speaking' involving the selection of linguistic items at all levels, from that of the allophone to the level of conversational strategy and even language. In spite of what we sometimes assume, in order for an instructor to become fully integrated in a social institution like the university, he/she must not only be able to convey his/her knowledge in the classroom but also participate in other types of verbal interaction such as office hours with the students, faculty meetings and interactions with the administrative staff. The purpose of the present article is to explore some of the implicit norms by which participants tend to abide in the course of four different communicative events in which the instructor regularly takes part.

### 2. *An ethnographic approach to language use*

Ethnography is a field of study which is concerned with the description and analysis of culture. In 1962 D. Hymes published an article entitled 'The ethnography of speaking' (Hymes 1962) in which he proposed a new synthesizing discipline focusing on communicative behaviour as one of the systems of culture. The ethnography of speaking, also known as ethnography of communication (Saville-Troike 1989) has two foci: particularistic and generalizing. On the one hand, it attempts to describe and understand communicative behaviour in specific cultural settings. On the other hand, it aims at developing a global theory of human communication.

The ethnography of speaking (henceforward ES) considers that sociological variables such as status and role are not permanent qualities of the speaker. Rather, they are constantly created and destroyed by means of linguistically encoded meanings which are always perceived not in abstract but as part of specific contexts

of language use. One of the basic concepts of ES is *communicative competence*, which is defined as the knowledge and skills a speaker needs in order to communicate appropriately within a particular social group. The concept was proposed by Hymes (1966) in order to call attention upon certain facts which had not been taken into account in the Chomskyan definition of linguistic competence:

(i) Language is one of a number of aspects in which the particular characteristics of a social group are manifested.

(ii) Since language is the basic means of the members of a community to organize social life, there must be certain rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless.

A competent speaker and social member must know not only whether something is formally *possible* (as the grammarian does) but also whether it is also *feasible*, *appropriate* and actually *performed* (Hymes 1966). In order to account for these four aspects, three units of analysis have been proposed: *speech situation*, *speech event* and *speech act*. *Speech situation* refers to the non-verbal context within which communication occurs. *Speech event* is the basic unit for descriptive purposes and refers to

"activities, or aspects of activities, that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech" (Hymes 1972:56)

The *speech act* is the third unit of analysis, and it is generally co-terminous with a single interactional function such as request, command, etc. It may take a verbal or a non-verbal form.

Once the ethnographer has identified the different speech events that occur in a certain speech community, he/she must describe their structure. The description is based on a series of relevant components which are mnemonically summarized under the letters of the word SPEAKING: setting and scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms of interaction and interpretation and genre. In this article I am going to concentrate on just one of these components: *norms of interaction and interpretation*.

Ethnographers define *norms of interaction* as

"prescriptive statements of behavior, of how people 'should' act, which are tied to the shared values of the speech community" (Saville-Troike 1989:154)

Some of these rules take the form of proverbs, aphorisms or even laws, whereas some others form part of the unconscious knowledge of the speakers. One example of a rule of interaction relevant in Catalonia could be the response 'Jesús!' or 'Salut!' to the act of sneezing and the subsequent expression of gratefulness by the person who produced the sneeze.

*Norms of interpretation* refer to all that cultural knowledge needed to fully understand a communicative event. They usually constitute a frame of reference, some kind of background knowledge against which norms of interaction are created and evaluated. According to Saville-Troike (1989:155) norms of interpretation may be related to rules of use [norms of interaction] in the prescriptive sense, but the positive or negative valuation and sanction which characterize the latter are not a

necessary condition for the existence of the former. To continue with the previous example, the norm of interpretation that would explain the interactive norm applying to the action of sneezing seems to be the fact that in the past it was thought that the soul left the body when someone sneezed: the interjection was intended to prevent the Devil (nowadays known as viruses!) from entering the body.

In the next four sections I will explore how the verbal behaviour of the speakers in verbal interactions with an instructor as one of the participants is conditioned by different norms of interaction and interpretation as they apply to specific speech situations. For each speech situation I will enumerate what I think are just two of the relevant norms.

### 3. *Speech event I: Class*

3.A.1. *Norm of interaction:* Students should not ask questions during the class. If they have any questions, they should save them for the end of the class. Then they should approach the instructor either as he/she is collecting his/her notes from the desk or in the hallway as he/she is going to another class or to his/her office.

3.A.2. *Norm of interpretation:* This norm is related to a certain definition of a class speech event. According to this definition, the basic end of a class speech event is the transmission of a series of scientific facts which the instructor knows about and the students do not. The presence of questions by a student in the middle of the class may be automatically interpreted as an obstacle to the smooth development of the process of transmission. Therefore, when a student asks a question, he/she runs the risk of losing face and being labelled as inconsiderate because he/she is bringing the focus of the class upon his/her particular interests.

3.B.1. *Norm of interaction:* Instructors should not ask questions to the students nor engage them in dialogue. According to this norm, the task of the instructor is to articulate his/her ideas in a series of statements as axiomatic as possible so that they can be easily collected by means of note-taking and, afterwards, memorized.

3.B.2. *Norm of interpretation:* Academic success depends on the ability to know and express as many scientific facts as possible. Therefore, the instructor's introduction of relativism and personal points of view in a class is seen as the result of his/her lack of necessary knowledge or preparation for the class. Intuitions and personal ideas do not form part of the body of 'academic knowledge' and, therefore, they should be excluded from the contents of a class.

### 4. *Speech event II: Visiting hours*

4.A.1. *Norms of interaction:* An encounter between student and instructor during office hours must be built up around specific questions which the students have considered carefully before going to the instructor. These questions must refer exclusively to the topics introduced during the class.

4.A.2. *Norm of interpretation:* The instructor's time and attention is considered to be highly valuable for two main reasons: (a) there might be other students with questions, and (b) the instructor is probably engaged in other 'more important tasks' such as research or administration. This means that each student must make effective use of his/her time for private consultation. The best way to achieve this effectiveness is to visit the professor with a clear agenda of questions which will be successively introduced in the course of the encounter.

4.B.1. *Norm of interaction:* In spite of the fact that the student does not need to request permission to engage the instructor in the encounter, it is important that his/her goal be made explicit at the very beginning.

4.B.2. *Norm of interpretation:* It is part of the academic duties of the instructor to attend his/her students on an individual basis at certain times during the weekly class schedule. The students know that the instructor will be in his/her office to attend their needs related to the course they are taking with him/her. Therefore, the consent to approach the instructor is automatically granted if the student does so during the pre-established periods. However, it is still important for the student to make sure that his/her goal is a 'legitimate' one, and this is done by making it explicit at the very beginning of the encounter. The presence of an 'illegitimate' goal could damage the student's face because it would show him/her as unaware of what is an appropriate 'way of talking' to an instructor. On the other hand, the absence of a goal could be interpreted as an attempt by the student to approach the instructor as a representative of a role different from that which the institution assigned him/her (eg. friend, counsellor, etc.).

## 5. *Speech event III: Faculty meeting*

5.A.1. *Norm of interaction:* Affairs are rarely discussed as being the result of actions or decisions by specific individuals. This means that many of the comments are made either in an impersonal way or assigning to them an abstract institutional subject. Indirectionality is a general feature of this type of speech event, especially when individuals present at the meeting are brought into the contents of the message.

5.A.2. *Norm of interpretation:* Academics, because of their intellectual background and interests, are never so 'down-to-earth' as to engage in direct confrontation with an individual. It is also assumed that if an academic invests a great deal of energy in controlling and criticising the action of certain individuals he/she cannot have much strength left for other academic or scientific endeavours. Therefore it is to the benefit of the speaker's face to show himself/herself as interested in the affairs of the institution but also sufficiently detached to be able to concentrate on more 'transcendental' matters.

5.B.1. *Norm of interaction:* One's contribution in a meeting should be geared towards convincing the rest of the participants of the righteousness of what is said. This requires the provision of a solid argumentation based on proven facts as well as logical relations. The speaker's contribution must also be clearly articulated and,

at the same time, it must be able to forestall possible counterarguments from other participants.

5.B.2. *Norm of interpretation:* A faculty meeting is an organ of the institution where decisions must be made in a democratic way. Each participant's point of view must be carefully considered by the other participants in order to be finally endorsed by the whole group. Since decisions must be taken within a limited period of time, the contributions of the participants cannot be gratuitous or spacy, they must be very much to the point and sufficiently clear so that the rest of the participants will be able to immediately reject or approve the speaker's stance.

## 6. *Speech event IV: Instructor-administrative assistant*

6.A.1. *Norm of interaction:* The instructor is the one who takes the initiative in the encounter. He/she is responsible for asking for information and making requests and the administrative staff must fulfill the instructor's needs.

6.A.2. *Norm of interpretation:* The actual running of the institution is in the hands of the administrative staff, the individuals that know most about the economic and academic regulations which must be followed. Their approval is becoming increasingly necessary for every action that the instructor wants to undertake, especially when it has to do with economic matters. Instructors, because of their research and teaching responsibilities, should not waste their time in trying to understand 'petty' administrative details. Therefore, they must constantly appeal to the expertise of the administrative staff for consultation as well as consent.

6.A.3. *Norm of interaction:* The interaction between an instructor and the administrative staff should be informal and relaxed.

6.A.4. *Norm of interpretation:* Instruction and administration are essential aspects for the functioning of the university as an educational institution. Both the instructor and the administrative assistant are there to fulfill the needs of the 'clients-students'. Both have the role of 'providers' of the service and, therefore, they consider themselves to be on the same side. This feeling of belonging to the same group is expressed and reinforced by means of solidarity signals such as the introduction of informality in the conversation.

## 7. *Conclusion*

What I have tried to do in this article is to show that it is possible for every speech situation to extract certain norms of interaction which speakers follow in order to be considered as a fully integrated member in a speech community. These norms of interaction are not arbitrary, they stem from the set of social values and background knowledge that the members of a speech community acquire in the process of becoming a mature adult and a competent professional. Norms of interaction are rarely made explicit to the speakers, they must be implicitly learnt with experience and exposure to different occasions of the same type of encounter.

It is also important to point out that the norms observed by the speakers of a speech community are not necessarily the 'ideal' ones, that is, those that make communication more effective. In interacting with others, a communicatively competent speaker must always be aware of the need to achieve a balance between the task of transferring information and that of trying to live in harmony with the addressee(s). Depending on the situation the speaker will tend to emphasize one aspect or the other.

The ethnography of speaking, by means of a concept such as norms of interaction and interpretation, allows us to connect the linguistic description of a speech event with a socio-cultural explanation of it. This explanation can only be obtained through the researcher's observation and involvement in the kinds of speech event described. Finally, the researcher must validate his/her perceptions against the intuitions of the members of the speech community. The analysis presented here is the result of the first two stages of an ethnographic study: observation and participation. What is left now is a positive or negative validation by those who usually take part in the speech events described.

Josep M. Cots  
Dpt. de Filologia - Secció de Filologia Anglesa  
Universitat de Lleida  
Apartat de Correus 471  
E-25080 Lleida

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- HYMES, D. (1962): *The ethnography of speaking*, in: T. GLADWIN and W.C. STURTEVANT (eds.), **Anthropology and human behavior**, Washington, DC: Anthropological Society of Washington.
- (1966): *On communicative competence*, excerpts published in: J.B. PRIDE and J. HOLMES (eds.) (1972), **Sociolinguistics**, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.
- (1972): *Models of interaction of language and social life*, in: J. GUMPERZ and D. HYMES (eds.) **Directions in Sociolinguistics: the ethnography of communication**, New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston.
- SAVILLE-TROIKE, M. (1989): **The ethnography of communication**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## RESUM

**Normes d'interacció i interpretació: aproximació etnogràfica al discurs en un context universitari català**

Aquest article és el resultat de l'anàlisi de quatre situacions comunicatives diferents, les quals formen part de la vida professional quotidiana de l'autor en una universitat catalana. Mitjançant l'aplicació d'un concepte com és el de *normes d'interacció i interpretació*, es demostra com el mètode etnogràfic ens permet integrar una descripció lingüística i una explicació socio-cultural del discurs.

## SUMMARY

The present article is the result of the analysis of four different communicative situations which form part of the author's ordinary professional life at a Catalan university. By applying a concept such as *norms of interaction and interpretation*, it is shown how the ethnographic approach allows us to integrate a linguistic description and a socio-cultural explanation of discourse.