Review of Dell Hymes, Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative, Inequality: Toward an Understanding of Voice

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Review
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REVIEWS


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This is a collection of articles originally published between 1973 and 1994, all revised for this volume. The book serves the useful purpose of making some of the papers easily accessible for the first time. More importantly, it encourages us to think about ethnography, linguistics, narrative, and inequality not just as four things Dell Hymes has repeatedly thought and written about but as they are related to each other. The ten chapters all bear on how an ethnographically informed study of language can aid in identifying and solving social problems, in particular problems connected with linguistic inequality.

Part I, ‘Ethnography’, consists of two chapters addressed originally to ethnographers of education. Providing a gentle reminder that participant observation does not in itself constitute ethnography, H discusses what makes ethnography systematic and how it differs in fundamental epistemological ways from experimental research, ways that make it potentially empowering and democratizing. He talks about the study of schools on the analogy of ethnology, especially the study of native American kinship, arguing that educational research should be more cumulative, more comparative, and more cooperative.

Part II, ‘Linguistics’, consists of the two longest and to my mind most thought-provoking chapters in the book. ‘Speech and language: On the origins and foundations of inequality among speakers’ is about human problems that arise as a result of facts about language and about solutions that linguists have proposed. The fact of linguistic diversity, for example, has always seemed problematic to Westerners, who have repeatedly proposed intellectual solutions involving original unity (from the Tower of Babel story to comparative searches for proto-languages to Universal Grammar), and practical solutions involving the privileging of a single language or variety. That diversity should pose a problem, or that original unity should be its solution, is not self-evident, however. For the Busama of New Guinea and the Quileute of Washington state, H says, ‘originally each person had a separate language, and . . . community of language was a subsequent development’ (28). What would a linguistics be like that took that view? Perhaps it would see in the many languages and varieties that exist evidence that social and historical adaptation is a stronger influence than shared roots or cognitive predisposition. Perhaps it would focus not on languages or dialects but on speech communities or ways of speaking. H similarly critiques other deeply believed, often invisible, ideas about language: the idea that different linguistic media (speaking, writing, signing) are simply different ways of encoding the same messages, the idea that language and reality are ideally in one-to-one correspondence, the idea that languages and varieties are thus potentially equivalent for practical purposes. That we continue to rediscover these issues almost 25 years after this chapter was originally written and have yet to become aware of the nuances of some of them shows how much there is to learn from rereading H’s work.

‘Report from an underdeveloped country’ is an attempt to ‘remedy the degree to which the United States is terrà incognita with regard to information as to varieties of language and values as to their use’ (65). H asks five questions. (1) What counts as a language? What is ‘Spanish’ in the U.S., for example? What does it mean to say, as people do about themselves and about others, that someone doesn’t have a language? (2) What counts as a language problem? What are the implications, for example, of
creating a category of Limited English Proficient students in a school system? Why is bilingualism an admirable goal for a European American but a problem for a Hispanic? (3) What counts as a proper use of language? Why, for example, are students encouraged to learn Parisian French but discouraged from speaking Louisiana French? (4) What counts, in linguistics, sociology, anthropology, as a contribution to our understanding of language? Relevant here are the facts that sociologists are not in the main trained to notice language, that linguists are not trained to notice details of social interaction, that ‘the peculiar combination of social theory, ethnographic perspective, and linguistic skills required by the thesis of this chapter is hard to find institutionalized’ (89). (5) What will count in changing the study of language so that it is responsive to the needs H has outlined? The sort of discipline that is required, says H, ‘must overcome the separation between questions of language and questions of value that has characterized the development of modern linguistics in the United States’ (100–101). The very adaptability of language implies maladaptation as well: resources suited to some purposes are unsuited to others. For linguists to continue to act as if the ‘potential’ equality of languages (the fact that all are structurally complex, that lexica grow easily, that change is natural) were equivalent to ‘actual’ equality is to sidestep some of the most important social issues to which linguistics is relevant.

Part III is ‘Narrative and inequality’. Here, in six chapters, H joins Kenneth Burke (and prefigures thousands of later scholars) in arguing for narrative as a way of knowing. Because teaching and learning through stories has traditionally been devalued in American educational culture in favor of ‘rational’ modes of information-processing, it is easy to fail to notice how the poetic patterning of traditional tales can help socialize Native American children to see the world as patterned in certain ways or to miss seeing that children’s writing or oral storytelling is richly structured. In several chapters H proposes reanalyses, his or Virginia Hymes’, of other people’s data, uncovering patterns of lines and stanzas. H follows Roman Jakobson and is in line with most linguists in holding the assumption that makes decontextualized reanalyses possible: that structure inheres in texts, available for discovery to anyone who looks systematically. The fact that different analysts analyze texts differently suggests, though, that structuring may be an aspect of interpretation as well as an aspect of expression. The implications of the interpreter’s role in the shaping of discourse have yet to be explored very far in linguistics.

H’s three major themes throughout the book are: the importance of understanding linguistic behavior in ethnographic context, the importance of taking a view of language and linguistics broad enough that it has something to say and do about inequality, and the importance and ubiquity of narrative poetry. One way of putting H’s contributions in perspective is to ask what has happened in linguistics with respect to each of these themes since H first began to argue for them in the 1960s.

Among sociolinguists and discourse analysts, the impact of the first and third themes has been enormous. Although the overlap among textbooks in these areas is small—sociolinguists and discourse analysts have diverse ways of delimiting their fields—the ethnography of communication is almost always discussed, and the idea that ordinary talk is structured in ways that reflect aesthetic principles of coherence underlies, in part, an enormous amount of work on the forms and functions of narrative. Our understanding is sometimes not as sensitive as H would like, often because we lack training in anthropological method and in close reading; we can benefit from H’s reminders that observation is not the same as ethnography, from his suggestions about systematicity and rigor, and from his repeated demonstrations that the sort of slow, loving analysis practiced by good literary critics is crucial in our field as well.
Linguists have been slower to acknowledge inequality. The dominant models of linguistic and sociolinguistic competence view speakers’ resources as either innate or largely predictable on the basis of environmental facts and thus equivalent from speaker to speaker. There continue to be important reasons, practical as well as theoretical, to take seriously arguments like William Labov’s (1972:201–40), for example, for distinguishing societal approval or disapproval of a way of talking from its potential effectiveness in context. But in repeatedly explicating and arguing for Basil Bernstein’s claims about the existence of restricted ways of talking, H makes a significant point: all speakers may have innate linguistic potential, and all speakers may have access to multiple resources as a result of the inevitable variability of language, but not all speakers are in fact equally resourceful. Some people do not realize their potential for creating grammars (Genie is a famous example), and some speakers have access to fewer and/or less useful sociolinguistic resources than do others. In the U.S., for example, highly elaborated verbal art is associated almost exclusively with groups of people who have access to socially stigmatized varieties; so there is a much larger body of Southern literature, for example, than of Midwestern literature. With respect to language, Midwesterners can fairly be said to have fewer expressive resources. Such observations are, of course, no less dangerous than ever if they are misunderstood, but they are nonetheless useful in that they pose new questions about things like power, oppression, and articulateness.

REFERENCE


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The first thing any red-blooded field-practicing real anthropologist or anthropological linguist will do when confronting any new ethnography is look at the back of the book to see which ‘people’ it deals with. Is it about ‘my people’, friends or enemies of ‘my people’, or, even—God-forbid—does it concern itself with some obscure group on the other side of the world from ‘my people’? In reading this work, my frustration increased—page after mounting page—when it became obvious that no quick answer to this natural query would be forthcoming. However, the reasons for this mystery became clear as I came to understand the logic underlying the ‘metaphysical community’ described in this fascinating and ambitious project.

To sum it up in a sentence, this is a discourse-based study of an indigenous South American Gé-speaking group in southern Brazil. That said, however, several comments must be made. This is not your average mainstream anthropological writing nor is it standard discourse analysis of the kind most linguists might be accustomed to. Also, while this book is an extension in some ways of Urban’s earlier work on Native American myth and ritual (1991), the present work is as much a statement on cross-cultural epistemology as it is about western culture theory, semantics, and the philosophy of language.