1 What are speech communities?

The study of speech communities is central to the understanding of human language and meaning. Speech communities are groups that share values and attitudes about language use, varieties and practices. These communities develop through prolonged interaction among those who operate within these shared and recognized beliefs and value systems regarding forms and styles of communication. While we are born with the ability to learn language, we do so within cultures and societies that frame the process of learning how to talk to others. This framing once exclusively occurred as face-to-face interactions within communities of speakers. Constant relocation, mass migration, transmigration, ever-evolving technology and globalization have transformed many societies and increased the need to provide more detailed descriptions and theories regarding the nature of speech communities. The importance of our growing understanding of speech communities remains one of the most significant projects faced by those interested in language, discourse and interaction. This chapter defines and identifies types of speech communities, provides the history of the term and examines its importance to the study of language and discourse in general.

The concept of speech community does not simply focus on groups that speak the same language. Rather, the concept takes as fact that language represents, embodies, constructs and constitutes meaningful participation in society and culture. It also assumes that a mutually intelligible symbolic and ideological communicative system must be at play among those who share knowledge and practices about how one is meaningful across social contexts.[1] Thus as peoples relocate away from their families and home communities and build others, relationships and interactions continue and change, and are sustained through the

[1] Of course concepts like mutual intelligibility and meaning are complex in and of themselves. The point here is that speech communities are also political and historical sites where social meaning is intrinsic in talk.

use of evolving technology and media that enhances, recognizes and re-creates communities. These interactions constitute the substance of human contact and the importance of language, discourse and verbal styles in the representation and negotiation of the relationships that ensue. It is within speech communities that identity, ideology and agency are actualized in society.[2]

1.1 SPEECH COMMUNITIES

A group of people is not necessarily a community unless they share a common view, activity, belief etc. Speech is not simply sounds that come from a person's mouth. Social actors recognize the significance of innate human sounds such as screams, moans, cries etc. without learning and being socialized into a system of meaning. In contrast, the act of turning human sound into symbols that are recognizable as speech and particular to a group of people requires an agreement of some sort regarding the system of symbols in circulation. That agreement can vary within a language and among various languages. Members must be socialized to learn the language symbols of that community and how and when to use them.

Communities can be defined and identified in terms of space, place, affiliation, practices and any combination of these terms. For example, while the term "community" is generally used in reference to a social unit larger than a household, it can also refer to a national and international group. Online communities can exist where members are in the thousands and there may be no physical, visual or auditory contact among members. Anthony Cohen believes that communities can be understood by their boundaries, since they are identified by both their uniqueness and difference. He argues that "a reasonable interpretation of the word's use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from members of other putative groups" (1985: 12). What is fundamental to both speech and community is that a system of interaction and symbols is shared, learned and taught, and that participants and members are aware they share this system. This is why speech communities are one way that language ideologies and social identities are constructed.

[2] See Bucholtz and Hall 2004, Duranti 2004 and Kroskrity 2004.

While there are many social and political forms a speech community may take – from nation-states to chat rooms dedicated to extraterrestrial sightings – speech communities are recognized as distinctive in relation to other speech communities. That is, they come into collective consciousness when there is a crisis of some sort and their existence is highlighted in relation to other communities. This is also triggered when hegemonic powers consider what the speech community is doing and saying to be a problem, or when researchers highlight speech community distinctiveness in some way and rely on them as a unit of study.[3] Thus, while speech community is a fundamental concept, it is also the object of unremitting critique. In fact, speech communities have been blamed for poor literary skills, epidemics, unemployment, increases in crime and so on.[4]

Many of the critical arguments surrounding speech communities concern two contrasting perspectives on how to define language and discourse. The first focuses on the analysis and description of linguistic, semantic and conversational features that are gathered from a group and are in turn deemed to be stable indicators of that speech community. The second perspective refers to the notion of language and discourse as a way of representing social life (Foucault 1972; Hall 1996a). In this case the focus is on how language is used to represent ideology, construct relationships, identity and so on. Although these perspectives can be complementary, they are often in contention with each other. The choice of perspective can have far-reaching implications for the speech community in question as well as the concept in general.

1.2 EARLY DEFINITIONS OF SPEECH COMMUNITY

In 1933 Leonard Bloomfield wrote: "A group of people who use the same set of speech signals is a *speech-community*" (1933: 29). This definition reflects a common belief of the time, that monolingualism – one language, one nation-state – is the canonical example of speech community (e.g. Anderson 1983). It focuses on the analysis and description of linguistic, semantic and conversational features that are identified by language authorities as belonging to a defined group. In this

[3] See Mercer (1994) and Bucholtz and Hall 2004 for discussion of identity coming into question when it is in crisis.

[4] This is true for the 1997 "Ebonics" case in the US, as well as arguments among sociologists that participation in the speech community leads to unemployment (e.g. Massey and Denton 1993 and Wilson 1987, 1996).

case, a community is considered to be a "social group of any size who reside in a specific locality, share government, and have a common cultural and historical heritage" (Random House Dictionary). During this period, the field of linguistics was mainly concerned with describing languages and the historical relationships of language families (R. A. Hudson 1980; Lyons 1981). Language itself was viewed as the product of history and politics but not integral to and entangled in it – and therefore not as an aspect of historicity and the context of politics and social life.[5]

Within the confines of descriptive and structural linguistics, it is best to think of language as a system of arbitrary symbols that exists at interconnecting levels that are devoid of meaning and significance beyond their function (see also Duranti 1997). Thus phonemes and sounds can be combined into meaningful morphemes that can become words, phrases, sentences and so on. Predictably, for traditional linguistics, the study of various aspects of languages was highly compartmentalized, so that the abstract and social aspects of language were not the subjects of study. While linguists are fond of saying "all grammars leak"[6] to acknowledge that there are exceptions to most linguistic rules, less attention has been paid to the outpouring of creativity and complexity that lead to these *leaks* and how, when and why speakers of languages find their system of symbols a subject of interest.

Of course, discovering the history of and describing the world's languages is very important business, and, in many respects, early definitions corresponded to Western arrogance and assumed the responsibility to "represent the world correctly" – with itself as the reference point. As Edward Said argued: "Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate."[7] From this perspective, it is not surprising that while Bloomfield considered the speech community to be the most important kind of social group, his evaluation of contact situations only recognized the most perceptible characteristics of speech communities. It did not assume that various sectors of society interacted with each other in a complementary way.[8] Instead, communities that arose out of European aggression and cultural hegemony

[5] This omission comes back to haunt the term, since sociolinguists' notion of context began to differ greatly from that of anthropology (see below).
[6] This quotation is generally attributed to Edward Sapir (1921: 39).
[7] *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2003.
[8] Of course I do not mean to suggest that Bloomfield was at fault here. Until as late as the 1960s, many linguists assumed that the contact situation that resulted from the Atlantic slave trade meant there was no mutual intelligibility among captives.

were regulated to supplemental status. Unfortunately, the notion that viable speech communities could not exist under such circumstances suggests that the great cultural, linguistic and social restructuring and reconstitution accomplished by colonized and conquered people were inconsequential in light of the enormity of the catastrophic events that they endured. This perspective also greatly affected earlier linguistic descriptions of speech communities that developed within plantation slavery in the Americas. Whether in relation to the language spoken throughout slave communities in the US or the Caribbean, earlier linguistic studies argued that African languages had minimal influence on language development (see below). As the later work of many sociolinguists and creolists proved, they were mistaken.

Bloomfield's conception of the homogeneous speech community represented the canon in linguistic anthropology until Noam Chomsky (1965) began to challenge the concept's utility. Chomsky's work critiqued descriptive and structural analyses of language and introduced a theoretical approach that explored the human capacity to produce language rather than language as a social construct. In *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Chomsky (1965) introduced the distinction between competence and performance, and abandoned the model that incorporated the speech community as the focus of linguistic analysis. The possibility of discovering human linguistic capacity was found in the individual: the cognitive, psychological self that develops irrespective of where performance of that knowledge resided – the speech community. Instead of resolving the conflict between whether the speech community establishes language and discourse norms or whether it is constituted through linguistic descriptions, Chomsky insistently argued that the essence of language resides in discovering the mechanism and theory behind the human ability to produce language. By regulating people's actual use of language to descriptions of linguistic problems (e.g. false starts, errors, etc.) the speech community suddenly was at risk of becoming the garbage dump for linguistic debris – what remains after theoretical analysis of linguistic capacity is complete.

As Chomsky's theories began to attack the concept's foundations, new generations of linguistic anthropologists began to offer more evidence of its importance for both members of speech communities and theorists who sought to develop analyses of language and discourse in groups. However, the most difficult tasks remained. Those were to determine: the role of cultural hegemony, the construction and re-construction of values, norms and standards in speech community representation, and why group differences do not destroy speech communities.

1.3 LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION

The linguistic analysis – disregarding speakers' beliefs, politics and social life – is often considered to be the "objective" and accurate description of speech community from the perspective of the dominant culture. Thus a national language can be proclaimed, even if it is only spoken by an elite few, and one dialect can be declared the prestige variety. At the same time, members of speech communities may, also, recognize that they can incorporate and act on, discursively and literally, the cultural hegemony that the dominant culture sustains, enforces and reproduces in ways that highlight representations of others who reside outside its boundaries (see Gramsci 1971 and Bourdieu 1991). That is to say, membership in a speech community includes local knowledge of the way language choice, variation and discourse represents identity, generation, occupation, politics, social relationships and more. This point is illustrated in the writer Jamaica Kincaid's description of the effect of colonization on Antigua and the complexity of using the language of the colonizer as the speech community's language:

> [W]hat I see is the millions of people, of whom I am just one, made orphans: no motherland, no fatherland, no gods, no mounds of earth for holy ground, no excess of love which might lead to the things that an excess of love sometimes brings and worst and most painful of all, no tongue. (For isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?) And what can that really mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal's deed. (Kincaid 1988: 31)

Throughout the social sciences, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of language and discourse in the representation of local knowledge, culture, identity and politics. This is especially true in the works of cultural anthropologists whose ethnographies are situated within communities whose members are aware of intra-community social and cultural differences and where transmigration, social identity and memory of imagined and experienced notions of *home* are part of the cultural fabric. In speech communities where there are multiple sites of contact across social class, status and sometimes national origin, local ideologies of language often reflect heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), the diversity and shifting of styles or linguistic codes that exist within and often among communities. For example, Deborah A. Thomas' ethnography of Jamaican identity includes the rural community Mango Mount, where social classes interact on a regular basis. Although the groups

communicate with each other, Thomas reports that "it is often clear which sector of the Mango Mount community the speaker belongs to by their language" (2004: 24). Dorinne Kondo (1997) explores the power of discourse in the representation of the lives of Asian Americans through the analysis of Asian American playwrights' and actors' performance of identity as a manifestation of their community norm of mediating multiple language ideologies and heteroglossia. Language and discourse are also integral to Kesha Fikes' (2009) work on Cape Verdeans in Cape Verde and Portugal. Fikes explores how transnationals rely on African language usage and referents to frame membership in multiple speech communities that represent both resistance to and inclusion of an African Diasporan speech community, and how they use these same referents to index the Portuguese metropole in contrast to rural Cape Verde as well.

As the preceding cases suggest, describing speech communities is no simple matter; nor should it be. Speech communities cannot be defined solely through linguistic analysis and description or by static physical location, since membership can be experienced as part of a nation-state, neighborhood, village, club, compound, online chat room, religious institution and so on. Moreover, unless they are members of highly stratified societies, adults often experience multiple communities. One's initial socialization into a speech community may occur within a culture with communicative values that differ from other cultures and communities that one encounters later in life.

Speech communities are often recognizable by the circulation of discourse and the repetition of activities and beliefs and values about these topics which are constantly discussed, evaluated, corroborated, mediated and reconstituted by its members. One's awareness of these issues is determined by whether and to what degree speech communities are in crisis. For some, awareness is ingrained in the cultural fabric and thus represents unmarked usage that encompasses the community's historicity, politics, ideology, representation and so on. Although these values are agreed upon, that does not necessarily mean that there is complete consensus about the implementation of these principles. Rather, what is at stake is knowledge of the symbolic, market and exchange value of varieties and styles within and across speech communities.

An earlier ethnography of the Vaupés Indians of southeastern Colombia by Jean Jackson (1974, 1983) revealed the complex intersection of culture, language, variation, ideology and society that may constitute speech communities. The Vaupés occupy a tropical rainforest that covers the countries of Colombia and Brazil. Whereas early reports described the languages of the region as mutually unintelligible, Jackson

discovered a decidedly different situation.[9] She found that the area was mainly a multilingual community where, with few exceptions, "all semi-sedentary Indians in Vaupés are multilingual speaking Tukanoan, Arawak, and Carib language families. All speak fluently at least three languages . . . some as many as ten" (1974: 55). Her analysis challenged many widely held linguistic theories about the overall effects of multilingualism in societies and the formation of speech communities. Moreover, although everyone was multilingual, language difference did not distinguish rank and other forms of social differentiation. In fact she found that "all Vaupés share a strikingly homogeneous culture" (53). They all share cultural and religious practices about how language should be used in daily life and the same rule of speech, "even though some Indians' verbal repertoires do not overlap" (55). She goes on to say that lack of overlap is rare because of the use of Tukano as a lingua franca.

The Vaupés lived in communities comprised of longhouses with patrilineal descent groups based on the language of the father. While the longhouses are multilingual, the main rule of marriage is "linguistic exogamy" – that the person marries outside the father's language aggregate. These aggregates do not occupy discrete territories and are not corporate groups, and most interactions are between aggregates. The use of the father's language reflects one's social identity. As Jackson states: "Membership is permanent and public; the one fact which will be known about an Indian before anything else will be his language-aggregate membership. If he marries a woman from far away, this is often the only information some of his relatives will have about her" (1974: 53).

Because of the complexity of the multilingual dynamics, Jackson suggested that the region be defined as a speech area and the longhouses be described as a speech community. Hymes (1974a) refers to Neustupny's interpretation of the Prague School notion of sharing ways of speaking across language boundaries – Sprechbund – to describe a "speech area" rather than a speech community to distinguish the phenomenon of shared ways of speaking, although people may not share languages (also see Romaine 1994). Yet it is not clear that this distinction is necessary to claim a speech community.[10] As Hymes has argued: "To participate in a speech community is not quite the same as to be a member of it . . . A

[9] Jackson reports that members from the Summer Institute of Linguistics which maintained fieldworkers in the region held this opinion; also Sorensen 1967.

[10] "Speech area" in some ways minimizes the importance of language ideology in distinguishing speech communities. This is especially important when media and technology are considered and groups form that share communicative norms and values but not necessarily native competence in the same language.

speech community is defined . . . as a community sharing knowledge of rules of conduct and interpretation of speech. Such sharing comprises knowledge of at least one form of speech, and knowledge also of its patterns of use" (1974: 50–51).

As examined in the following sections, the notion of language that binds the speech community concept is constructed around several major theories regarding language as a social construct. These include the disciplinary perspectives of linguistic anthropology, the perspectives of sociolinguistics and the perspective of theorists who focus on language ideology and attitudes about language use, varieties and practices.

1.4 RETRIEVING THE SPEECH COMMUNITY

The work of John Gumperz (1968, 1972, 1982a) revived the concept of the speech community by considering it a social construct. He defined verbal interaction as "a social process in which utterances are selected in accordance with socially recognized norms and expectations" (1972: 219). Instead of focusing on a single language model, he defined the speech community as "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage" (219).[11] Gumperz focused on interface communication and determined that the notion of consistent, repetitive and predictable interactions and contact is necessary for a speech community to exist. He argued that regardless of the linguistic similarities and differences, "the speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms" (220). This formulation could incorporate the sociolinguistic research that was occurring in cities at the time (see below) and reconstituted the notion of speech community to include not only languages and language boundaries, but also values, attitudes and ideologies about language. Thus, while the concept of the speech community initially focused on language systems, relationships and boundaries, it expanded to include the notion of social representation and norms in the form of attitudes, values, beliefs and practices – and the notion that members of speech communities work their languages as social and cultural products.

[11] This is reprinted from his 1968 contribution. The Speech Community, in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.

Many direct and indirect efforts to reclaim the integrity of speech community that complemented Gumperz's interpretation emerged. In particular, Dell Hymes described the speech community as a "fundamental concept for the relation between language, speech, and social structure" (1964: 385). He considered the question of boundaries essential in order to recognize that communities are not, by definition, fixed units. In fact, Dell Hymes' model of ethnographies of communication and speaking argued for the importance of communicative competence – the knowledge a speaker must have to function as a member of a social group. Communicative competence is based on language use and socialization within cultures, and one becomes knowledgeable of both grammar and appropriateness across speech acts and events that are evaluated and corroborated by others. Hymes' argument that competence was "the interrelationship of language with the other code of communicative conduct" (1972: 277–278) replaced the notion that a language constitutes a speech community with the recognition that speech community, also, requires a code of beliefs and behaviors about language and discourse and knowledge of how to use them.

The influence of John Gumperz and Dell Hymes on the understanding of speech communities and language and discourse cannot be overstated. Their analyses and contributions are discussed throughout this text.

1.5 SOCIOLINGUISTS AND SOCIAL ACTORS

One of the greatest challenges to the reformulated concept of speech community described above actually came from the field of sociolinguistics and creole language studies. This is not surprising, since sociolinguistics is the study of language variation and the identification of features that systematically differ from other varieties. Similarly, creole language studies, which examines how multiple languages combine to form new language systems, must shift through contact language systems in order to determine whether one is distinct enough from all other languages present to be called a language in and of itself.[12] Thus both areas focus on the differences among and within speech communities that often resulted from discrimination in terms of class, gender and race and colonial conquest. In a field notorious for proclaiming that the difference between a language and dialect is who controls the army,

[12] This is to say nothing of the complex arguments necessary to assign pidgin, creole, semi-creole and dialect designations to languages that arose from plantation contact situations.