ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION – A STUDY OF JUST LATHER, THAT'S ALL

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ABSTRACT: *Ethnography of Communication is a novel approach that relates language with the cultural norms, values and the speaking rules that are specific to a particular speech community. Duranti (1997)[1] defines Ethnography as follows:" Ethnography is the written description of the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretive practices characteristic of a particular group of people". A number of scholars including Dell Hymes (1962)[2] Sherzer (1983)[3], Hill and Hill (1986)[4] and Saville-Troike (2003)[5] worked in the framework of ethnography of communication. Though the studies made by all ethnographers generally focus on the spoken language in a community, it is possible to extend the above frameworks to the analysis of short stories in view of the fact that many short stories are not merely narratives from a third person point of view but involve dialogues between characters. Often the speech patterns, expressions, motivations and the logical deductions they make are in conformity with the particular society they belong to. In particular, the SPEAKING Model evolved by Dell Hymes (1974)[6] is found to be highly adaptable to the analysis of short stories.*

KEYWORDS: Communication, Just Lather, Language, Culture, Characters, Conflict

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography of Communication is a novel approach that relates language with the cultural norms, values and the speaking rules that are specific to a particular speech community. Duranti (1997)[1] defines Ethnography as follows:

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Hymes' Ethnography of Speaking is a continuation of his 1962 work where he proposed to combine ethnography and linguistics. This conception was partly in response to a Chomskian

Generative Grammar, which delinked Linguistics with all other branches of knowledge like Anthropology and Psychology. Thus the Ethnography of Communication was a new form of research but with roots in the earlier traditions of Anthropology.

Later, in 1974 Dell Hymes proposed his SPEAKING Model with eight components to analyze a speech event. He uses SPEAKING as an acronym for the components that he considers relevant in understanding a speech event.

An attempt is made in this paper to interpret *Just Lather, That's All* by Hernando Tellez in the SPEAKING framework proposed by Dell Hymes.

Setting and Scene

Setting refers to physical circumstances, that is, the actual place and scene refers to the abstract psychological setting. Within a particular setting the interpretation of a scene may change, if the level of formality and occasion change. For example, the conference hall of a company may be used to hold a board meeting or to host a tea party. In each case, while the setting remains the same, the scene changes with the occasion.

In the story *Just Lather, That's All*, the setting is a strife-torn city where the government forces and the rebels were at war. The captain of the government forces, Torres, enters a barber's shop for a shave. The barber himself is a rebel. Thus, the physical setting is a barber's shop but the scene is like that of a battleground as the barber comes under a psychological pressure to kill the captain by slitting his throat. Thus, the physical setting of a barber's shop is psychologically reinterpreted as a battleground between the captain and the rebel. The readers are aware of the barber being a rebel and they keep wondering as to what the outcome would be.

Participants

Any speech event, or for that matter, any communicative event includes interlocutors of various types like speaker-listener, addresser-addressee or sender-receiver. These two roles may be reversible or irreversible. Further, the hearers may be one or many as in the case of a public lecture or the hearer/hearers may not be physically present, as in the case of a telephone conversation. The sender and the receiver may not see each other. But underlying all these communicative events, there is a mutual expectation and awareness on the part of the roles about the presence or existence of the other role. For instance, when a devotee prays to God, he expects that there is God and obviously the unseen God is the other participant. The participants in the story *Just Lather, That's All* are Captain Torres and the barber. Torres comes to the barber's shop with full knowledge that the barber is one of the rebels. The barber is not sure whether Torres found him out to be a rebel or not. All the conversation between them revolves round the fight between the forces and the rebels. Just like any conversation, the roles are interchanged and each one takes his conversational turn.

Ends

Every communicative event takes place with certain objectives or outcomes or even personal goals of the participants. Sometimes these personal goals may be contributory to each other or they may be in conflict with each other. For instance, in a courtroom, the goals of the prosecution lawyer and those of the defence lawyer are in conflict with each other. But in spite of these personal goals, there may be a common social end for all the participants, namely, to see that justice is done. Similarly, in a lecture, the speaker's personal goal and the audience's

personal goal may be different but the common social end is to see that transfer of knowledge takes place.

Evidently, the two participants, Captain Torres and the barber, have their own personal ends. The barber seeks to gather as much information as possible from the captain. Feigning innocence, he tries to know the plans of the captain. The captain, on the other hand, responds with relevant information without any reservations. His goal is to observe the barber's reaction and response. Thus, each of the participants has his own goal but the common conversational goal of exchange of relevant information is not violated.

Act Sequence

This refers to the actual form and content of what is said. In other words, in a communicative event, it is important to know the exact words that are used and whether they are appropriate to the topic and occasion. A particular topic or a particular occasion may require a particular act sequence, that is, certain words in a certain way. For instance, in a religious discourse it is highly inappropriate to use slang. Similarly, while giving his verdict, a judge is not expected to change the particular types of words that are appropriate in that situation and resort to colloquial expressions.

The conversation between the captain and the barber is very straightforward and involves no ambiguity. Each of the two participants asks a direct question and gets back a direct response, as the following dialogue shows:

The Barber: 'How many did you catch?'

The Captain: 'Fourteen. We had to go pretty deep into the woods to find them. But we'll get even. Not one of them comes out of this alive, not one.'

As can be seen from the above dialogue, the words and the syntactic constructions are entirely appropriate to a casual conversation. They befit the scene of the conversation and the roles that the participants play.

Key

In a speech event, the tone or the manner in which something is said often conveys more than the actual meanings of the words. This is the Key. The listeners often pay more attention to the tone or the intonation of the speaker rather than only to the meaning of the words. When the actual words used and the tone in which they are used are not compatible with each other, the listeners are likely to pay more attention to the tone, that is, the Key, rather than to the actual meaning of the words. Thus the key, if incompatible with the words uttered, reveals the intentions of the speaker inadvertently.

In the story *Just Lather, That's All* Captain Torres says there was plenty to do that afternoon. At this, the barber stops lathering and asks with a 'feigned lack of interest' whether there was going to be a firing squad. The phrase 'feigned lack of interest' clearly indicates that the barber is suppressing his anxiety and he is trying to sound normal, lest his tone would give him away.

Instrumentalities

This refers to the channel of the communication, that is, whether it is oral or written or telegraphic mode. It also refers to the varieties used such as dialect, register, standard variety

and so on. For instance, a lawyer during his arguments in a court uses a highly formal, written legal variety, even though he never uses it in his normal speech. Any other style or variety would be inappropriate here. Similarly, a cricket commentator uses a colloquial variety of English, which is full of elliptical sentences and sometimes even slang. A formal variety of spoken English is not an appropriate instrumentality here. People may switch from one instrumentality to another during the same verbal exchange depending on the topic and other social variables.

The two participants Captain Torres and the barber use the same kind of dialect, which is informal. There is no disparity of instrumentalities in their speech. Both of them consistently use the same kind of informal, spoken variety, which is exactly compatible with the other.

As an example, let us consider the following lines:

'Come to the school today at six o'clock.'

'The same thing as the other day?' I asked horrified.

'It could be better,' he replied.

'What do you plan to do?'

'I don't know yet. But we amuse ourselves.'

Once more he leaned back and closed his eyes. I approached him with the razor poised.

'Do you plan to punish them all?'

I ventured timidly.

'All.'

Norms of Interaction and Interpretation

This refers to the specific behavioral norms and practices that each community may have. These specific norms are not normally shared by the other communities. They range from the body language such as posture, gaze return, shaking hands to the way we behave or speak with strangers. Sometimes these behavioral norms may be very subtle but if strangers flout such practices, it attracts attention. These reflect in individual behavior as well as social behavior. These norms include even the conversational distance, hugging in public and traditional ways of greetings. For instance, it is perfectly normal in western countries for a wife and husband to hug each other in public, which is not an acceptable norm in India. The conversational distance between two speakers varies from culture to culture, as for instance between Indians and Americans. These behavioral norms are often markers of identity for each community and it becomes important for them to preserve them as a sign of their separate identity.

Captain Torres and the barber belong to rival camps, each bent on killing the other but during their conversation never do they violate the norms of interaction expected of two participants in a polite setting. Concealing their inner motives, each one obeys the norms of interaction and interprets and other participant's responses and reactions correctly so that the conversation never breaks down.

Genre

This term refers to clearly demarcated types of utterance such as whether it is a poem, or a proverb, or a joke, or a riddle, or a prayer, or a sermon and so on. Each genre may be appropriate and relevant in certain situations but not in others. For example, it is highly irrelevant to tell a joke during the course of a prayer meeting. Similarly, if someone sermonizes during a chat, people immediately ask him to stop it. Similarly, in the middle of a friendly conversation, no one says a prayer.

As the entire story describes a casual encounter between two participants belonging to rival groups, the genre used in the conversation of the two participants is entirely natural and normal. The conversation takes place briskly in short elliptical sentences, briefly interrupted by short spells of silence, resuming once again in another round of exchanges between the two participants. Thus no unusual genre, which is incompatible with the situation, is used anywhere.

Even though Hymes is speaking of talk in his SPEAKING formula, all these components are applicable to any creative piece of work, where two characters are shown in a conversation. Further, it must be kept in mind that all these components together form a totality in a communicative event, and when we analyze a communicative event, we are only factorizing them each at one time, and not because they are all independent of each other. In other words, an analyst or literary critic can take up a communicative event and analyze it in terms of the various components that comprise the communicative event.

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