

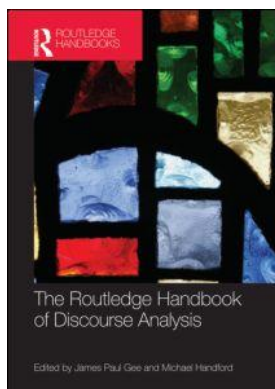
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 30 Sep 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis

James Paul Gee, Michael Handford

Discourse-oriented ethnography

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203809068.ch11>

Graham Smart

Published online on: 16 Nov 2011

How to cite :- Graham Smart. 16 Nov 2011, *Discourse-oriented ethnography from*: The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis Routledge

Accessed on: 30 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203809068.ch11>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Discourse-oriented ethnography

Graham Smart

This chapter discusses two widely practised traditions of ethnography that each offer researchers a methodology for investigating a social group's culture and discourse practices: interpretive ethnography and ethnography of communication. Here I would make an initial distinction between ethnography and case study research. While both methodologies involve 'naturalistic' or 'field' research and the intention of both is to observe and explain the social world as it is, without intervention or manipulation (to the degree that this is possible), a case study typically focuses on the experience of a small number of informants or on a single event, and an ethnography investigates the local culture of a particular social group, viewed as a collective, with the goal of producing a holistic account of its shared conceptual world. And I use the term 'methodology' rather than 'method' here with meaningful intent. While some researchers use the two terms interchangeably, others find it useful to make a distinction between them. In the latter view, a research method is a set of procedures for collecting and analysing research data, while a research methodology is a method *as well as* an implicit set of assumptions regarding the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology).

The chapter begins with a section providing background on the emergence of ethnography in the fields of anthropology and sociology and on its subsequent evolution into a research methodology employed by various disciplines in the social sciences. The next section focuses on the two discourse-oriented approaches to ethnography, discussing each in turn. The chapter concludes with an account of how the author analyzed interview data in an ethnographic study of the discourse practices and intellectual work of economists at the Bank of Canada, the country's central bank.

Origins and brief history of ethnography

What we might view as a precursor to ethnography originated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a response to Europeans' encounters with culturally and racially diverse peoples during early voyages to the western hemisphere and South Pacific (Vidich and Lyman, 1998). These European travellers were prompted to ask questions about the origins, histories, languages, and ways of life of the varied groups of peoples they met – questions motivated both by an epistemological urge to situate unfamiliar cultures within the traditional worldview and received knowledge of western Europe and by the colonizer's need to organize and justify the exploitation of these cultures for their labour and natural resources (Asad, 1973). As a consequence, early proto-ethnographic accounts can be found in texts produced by European explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators for readers in governments and other institutions.

Ethnography in its academic guise emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, as a research methodology employed by cultural anthropologists for conducting extended in-depth investigations of the cultures of newly encountered peoples – again, for the most part in the ‘New World’ and South Pacific. Prominent examples of this genre are the field studies of Franz Boas (1897) in the north-western coastal regions of North America, Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) in the Trobriand Islands, Margaret Mead in Samoa (1928), and Gregory Bateson (1936) in New Guinea.

In the following decades, a number of American sociologists took up the methodology, turning an ‘ethnographic gaze’ (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) on the social practices of urban subcultures within their own society, as with the field work of Helen Lynd and Robert Lynd (1937) among residents of Muncie, Indiana; of Nels Anderson (1940) among homeless ‘hobos’ in Chicago; of William Foote Whyte (1943) on an Italian community in Boston; and of Elliot Liebow (1966) among African Americans in a Washington, DC neighbourhood

In the years since, ethnography has been adopted by a range of other disciplines, including science studies (Latour and Woolgar, 1986), education (Goetz and Breneman, 1988), human geography (Mountz and Wright, 1996), and organizational studies (Orr, 1996). At the same time ethnography has been appropriated for applied purposes in industry (Richardson and Walker, 1948) and management (Jackell, 1988) as well as in policy areas such as education (Hess, 1991), public health (Jafarey, 2009), and criminology (Auty and Briggs, 2004). Recent decades have also seen the emergence of postmodern and other alternative forms of ethnography, such as critical ethnography, feminist ethnography, auto-ethnography, performance ethnography, video ethnography, and virtual Web-based ethnography.¹ As ethnography has migrated across these various academic disciplines, professional fields, and alternative forms and as researchers have adapted it to their own ends, the methodology has undergone a diversification of goals, epistemologies, and methods, while still retaining its larger purpose of investigating the culture and social reality of a particular community or group.

One direction that ethnography has taken since the mid-twentieth century is to focus its inquiry on the discourse practices of particular social groups – as these discourse practices are instantiated in writing, speaking, or other symbolic forms. The next section of the chapter describes two such approaches.

Discourse-oriented ethnography: two approaches

This section discusses two discourse-oriented approaches to ethnography: ‘interpretive ethnography’ and ‘ethnography of communication’, the first introduced by Clifford Geertz and the second by Dell Hymes. With both approaches, a researcher undertakes to investigate the relationship between the culture of a particular social group and its language or other symbolic resources in order to learn something of how members of the group live, interact, and communicate.

Interpretive ethnography

Interpretive ethnography (also referred to as symbolic or semiotic ethnography), as conceived by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983, 1973) during his field studies in Southeast Asia – in Bali, most famously – and in North Africa from the 1950s to the 1980s, is a methodology that enables a researcher to study the discourse practices through which a particular social group constructs, maintains, and reproduces a shared social world. The methodology has been practiced and further developed by other researchers such as Michael Agar (1980), John Van Maanen (1988), Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1985), and Norman Denzin (1997).

Geertz's (1973) vision of ethnography rests on a semiotic notion of culture: '[a culture] is an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [*sic*] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life' (p. 89). For Geertz, the task of the ethnographer is to spend an extended period of time within the group under study as a participant-observer and to chart the network of explicitly and tacitly shared meanings that constitute the group's social reality, as seen from the viewpoint of a quasi-insider. Geertz articulates this perspective on culture and ethnography below:

Believing ... that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself [*sic*] has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the [ethnographic] analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. ... The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is... to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live.

(1973: 5, 24)

For Geertz (1983), then, human cognition is largely social in nature – a 'matter of trafficking in the symbolic forms available within a particular community' (153) – and the work of an ethnographer is to investigate the life-world (Schütz, 1974) of a particular social group, mapping out its 'systems of symbols' (182) as 'modes of thought, idiom to be interpreted' (120).

Accordingly, for Geertz (1973), the ultimate aim of interpretive ethnography is to develop a 'thick description'² (6) of a social group's 'interworked systems of construable signs' (14) as 'structures of meaning' (182). Geertz (1973) describes this task as follows: 'What the ethnographer is in fact faced with [...] is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he [*sic*] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render' (9). The result of this rendering is a broad portrait of a social group's distinctive world of concepts and symbol systems.

Thus interpretive ethnography offers the researcher a methodology for exploring the discourse practices of a particular group of people – as their discourse is instantiated in writing, speaking, or other symbol systems – with the goal of learning how members of the group perceive, function and learn within their collectively created and maintained 'conceptual world'. The eventual outcome of such research is a 'thick description' of the group's culture, a description inscribed in an ethnographic account conveying a quasi-insider's understanding of how members of the group communicate and interact with one another, what they believe and value, how they define and solve common problems, how they construct and apply knowledge, and how they accomplish other meaningful communal activities.

Interpretive ethnography, in undertaking to explore and produce a representation of the shared meanings that constitute the discursively constructed conceptual world of a given social group, relies heavily on the practice of eliciting and presenting 'displays of members' thoughts, theories, and world views' (Van Maanen, 1988). To this end, the ethnographer collects a variety of data including field-notes from observations, interviews with informants, texts in different symbol systems, and in some cases data from surveys and focus groups. Using an iterative procedure referred to as 'recursive analysis' (Merriam, 1988; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993), the ethnographer moves through repeated cycles of data collection, analysis of the data, reflection on the results of the analysis, possible redirection of the research in light of the analysis and reflection, and then more data collection, analysis, reflection, and so on. With its iterative cyclical pattern of data collection, analysis, and reflection, 'recursive analysis' has a family resemblance to the 'grounded theory' approach introduced by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and further

developed in the decades since by these two scholars and other methodologists working in the same tradition (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Glaser, 2001; Charmaz, 2006).

Throughout the process of data collection, analysis, and reflection the ethnographer strives to develop provisional mini-theories – what Geertz (1983) refers to as ‘low-hovering theories’: theories that remain very close to informants’ ‘first-order constructs of reality’ as found in the data (1973) – gradually working towards the production of an ethnographic account – a ‘thick description’ of the ‘conceptual world’ constructed and maintained by the social group under study.

During this ongoing cyclical process, the ethnographer works with social theories of two kinds: what Geertz (1973) calls ‘experience-near’ concepts (another term for the informants’ ‘first-order constructs of reality’ mentioned above) and the ‘experience-distant’ concepts of disciplinary theorists. He distinguishes between the two below:

An experience-near concept is, roughly, one which someone – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant – might himself [*sic*] naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one which specialists of one sort or another – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer – employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims.

(p. 57)

For Geertz, then, an essential part of the ethnographer’s work is to identify within his or her data concepts that have been created locally by the social group under study – ‘experience-near concepts’ – and to ‘place them in illuminating connection’ with the ‘concepts [that] theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life’. The aim here, according to Geertz (1973), is to produce ‘an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, [...] nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence’ (p. 57). As mentioned earlier, the desired outcome of this work is a ‘thick description’ – an account of the group’s collective meaning-making activities and resultant conceptual world, as theorized through the disciplinary concepts employed by the researcher in the analysis.

A researcher might well ask, however, how one is to go about identifying key ‘experience-near concepts’ in one’s data and mapping out the conceptual world of the social group under study. In his methodological writings, Geertz (1983) offers the researcher three favoured analytical strategies: the ‘[search for] convergent data; the explication of linguistic classifications; and the examination of the life cycle’ (p. 156). According to Geertz, in looking for ‘convergent data’, a researcher should seek, within the data collected for a study, instances of common perspectives shared among the ‘multiply connected individuals’ within the group – ‘a mutually reinforcing network of social understandings’ (pp. 156–157). The ‘explication of linguistic classifications’ is the strategy of seeking frequently used terms in the vernacular of the group and of probing these terms as markers of shared meanings, which, taken together, can be seen to suggest ‘a whole way of going at the world’ (p. 157). Finally, in referring to the ‘examination of the life cycle’, Geertz is talking about searching in the data for stories from informants describing significant episodes in the group’s shared history or pointing to important lines of communal development, and then analysing these stories as symbolic artefacts, potentially rich in meaning. Such stories, once analysed, may cast light on the group’s history as ‘a structure of hope, fear, desire, and disappointment’ (pp. 159–160).

Examples of book-length research studies using interpretive ethnography include Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar’s *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Social Facts* (1979), Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (1980), John Swales’s *Other Floors, Other Voices: A Textography of a Small University Building* (1998), Paul Prior’s *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy* (1998), and the

author's own *Writing the Economy: Activity, Genre and Technology in the World of Banking* (2006). The diversity of these studies reflects the versatility offered by interpretive ethnography for investigating the cultures and discourse practices of different social groups within school, workplace, and community settings.

Ethnography of communication

The 'ethnography of communication', introduced by anthropologist and sociolinguist Dell Hymes in a seminal 1962 paper, is a methodology that enables a researcher to explore the distinctive configuration of verbal routines, conventions, and genres that structures communication within any given social group. As with Clifford Geertz, it was Hymes' experience in the field as a cultural anthropologist – in his case, among the Aboriginal peoples of the north-western coastal area of North America, in work inspired by Franz Boas' (1897) earlier work in the same region – that provided the impetus for methodological innovation.

An approach that combines ethnography – the description and analysis of culture – with linguistics – the description and analysis of language – the ethnography of communication takes as its scholarly remit the study of the 'speech community' (Bloomfield, 1933; Labov, 1966) – a group of people sharing linguistic resources as well as norms of interaction, expression, and interpretation – along with the 'speech situations', 'speech events', and 'speech acts' that serve to organize communicative interaction within the group. Researchers have used the approach to describe and analyze the 'rules of speaking' in a wide range of speech communities, while at the same time contributing concepts and theories to a larger meta-understanding of patterns of communication across human cultures (Saville-Troike, 1982).

While Hymes originally referred to his methodology as the 'ethnography of speaking', reflecting a focus on spoken language, he and John Gumperz later reconceived the approach along broader lines as the 'ethnography of communication' (Gumperz and Hymes, 1964), expanding the possible objects of study so as to include 'the various available channels, and their modes of use, speaking, writing, printing, drumming, blowing, whistling, singing, face and body motion as visually perceived, smelling, tasting, and tactile sensation [along with] the various codes shared by various participants, linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesic, musical, and other. ...' (13). Indeed, later on in his career Hymes (1981, 2003) further adapted the ethnography of communication into a specialized approach that he termed 'ethnopoetics', which Hymes used in order to identify poetic elements in written texts, transcriptions, and artefacts conveying the folklore and myths of North American Aboriginal peoples. Most of the researchers who have contributed to the development of the ethnography of communication, however, have retained the original focus on spoken language; these include John Gumperz (1972), Joel Sherzer (1974), Gerry Philipsen (1992), Iffat Farah (1992), Dan Slobin (1967), Richard Bauman (1974), Susan Philips (1983), Susan Irvin-Tripp (1964), and Muriel Saville-Troike (1982).

As conceived by Hymes, the ethnography of communication is founded on the theoretical assumption that structured patterns of language use within speech communities are co-terminous and interactive with patterns of social action and social organization. Farah (1998, cited in Johnstone and Marcellino, 2010) elaborates on Hymes' theoretical perspective, which was, at least in part, a reaction against the primacy of Noam Chomsky's (1957) formal linguistics, with its focus on a universal context-free grammar and ideal speaker-listeners (Keating, 2001):

[T]he study of language must concern itself with describing and analyzing the ability of the native speakers to use language for communication in real situations (communicative competence) rather than limiting itself to describing the potential ability of the ideal speaker/

listener to produce grammatically correct sentences (linguistic competence). Speakers of a language in particular communities are able to communicate with each other in a manner which is not only correct but also appropriate to the sociocultural context. This ability involves a shared knowledge of the linguistic code as well as of the socio-cultural rules, norms and values which guide the conduct and interpretation of speech and other channels of communication in a community.

(p. 125)

In coining the term ‘communicative competence’ to describe what an individual needs to know and be capable of doing, both linguistically and socially, in order to communicate effectively within a particular speech community, Hymes contributed a concept that would become widely used in language education from the late 1970s onward, particularly in second-language and foreign-language teaching (Canale and Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983; Candlin, 2001). Hymes (1972) describes what such communicative competence involves, using the experience of a child as an example:

We have to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where and in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others. This competence, moreover, is integral with attitudes, values, and motivations concerning language, its features and uses, and integral with competence for, and attitudes towards, the interrelation of language with the other code of communicative conduct [viz. social interaction].

(pp. 277–278)

For practitioners of the ethnography of communication, then, the central question to pursue in investigating the communicative norms of a speech community is the following (Saville-Troike, 1982): ‘What does a speaker need to know in order to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community, and how does he or she learn?’ (p. 2). Hymes (1967) elaborates on this question to offer a guide to researchers intending to investigate a speech community’s ‘rules of speaking’:

What [forms of language] are used, where and when, among whom, and for what purpose and with what result, to say what, in what way; subject to what norms of interaction and of interpretation; as instances of what speech acts and genres of speaking? How do community and personal beliefs, values and practices impinge upon the use of language, and upon the acquisition of such language by children?

(p. 8)

For an ethnographer of communication undertaking to explore the rules of speaking that organize communicative interaction within a particular speech community, two kinds of research are necessary – emic and etic. A significant part of the culture-specific knowledge needed if one is to answer Hymes’ questions above requires an emic, or insider-like, perspective, which can only be gained through extended experience as a participant-observer within the group under study, with a year of participant observation within the speech community being sometimes mentioned as a minimum duration (Saville-Troike, 1982). Depending on the ethnographer’s status within the speech community and access to reliable informants, the data to be collected might include observational field-notes, interviews with a variety of different individuals, artistic and other material artefacts, as well as secondary sources providing background on the history, demographics, and social organization of the group.

For the second kind of inquiry – conducted from an etic, or outsider, position – Hymes (1972) offers researchers a heuristic acronym for identifying the various facets of a speech event: SPEAKING. Hymes points to eight such facets – setting, participants, ends, act sequences, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre. Farah (1998: 26) describes the components of this heuristic in useful detail:

(**S**) Setting including the time and place, physical aspects of the situation such as arrangement of furniture in the classroom; (**P**) participant identity including personal characteristics such as age and sex, social status, relationship with each other; (**E**) ends including the purpose of the event itself as well as the individual goals of the participants; (**A**) act, sequence or how speech acts are organized within a speech event and what topic/s are addressed; (**K**) key or the tone and manner in which something is said or written; (**I**) instrumentalities or the linguistic code i.e. language, dialect, variety and channel i.e. speech or writing; (**N**) norm or the standard socio-cultural rules of interaction and interpretation; and (**G**) genre or type of event such as lecture, poem, letter.

(p. 127)

Hymes' acronym is reminiscent of literary critic and rhetorician Kenneth Burke's (1989) 'dramatic pentad' – act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose – which Burke proposed as an analytical tool for examining discursive events – an influence that Hymes (2003) readily acknowledged. Indeed, Hymes studied under Burke at Indiana University, and the two scholars subsequently maintained a decades-long correspondence and had a mutual influence on one another's work (Jordan, 2005).

Notable book-length studies employing the ethnography of communication as a methodology include those of Gerry Philipsen (1992), *Speaking Culturally: Explorations in Social Communication*; Joel Sherzer (1983), *Kuna Ways of Speaking: An Ethnographic Perspective*; Richard Bauman (1983), *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism and Silence among Seventeenth Century Quakers*; Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon (1979), *Linguistic Convergence: An Ethnography of Speaking at Fort Chipewyan*; Iffat Farah (1992), *Literacy Practices in a Rural Community in Pakistan*; and Cazden, John, and Hymes (1972), *Functions of Language in the Classroom*.

Analysing interview data in an ethnographic study

In this section of the chapter I describe two episodes that occurred when I was analyzing interview transcripts during the preparation of my book *Writing the Economy: Activity, Genre and Technology in the World of Banking*, an ethnographic study of the intellectual work and discourse practices of economists at the Bank of Canada that explores the role of writing and texts, used in combination with computer-run economic models, in the collaborative activities of knowledge-building, policy-making, and public communication. Earlier in the chapter I mentioned Clifford Geertz's (1973: 56–57) suggestion to ethnographers that they search in their data for instances of 'experience-near' concepts – local concepts created by the social group under study – and that they attempt to 'place [these experience-near concepts] in illuminating connection' with 'concepts [that] theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life' – referred to by Geertz as 'experience-distant' concepts. For Geertz, making such 'illuminating connections' was an integral part of producing a 'thick description' of the group's meaning-making activities and shared conceptual world.

At one point, as I was analysing the transcript of an interview with a senior Bank of Canada executive, I recognized an 'experience-near concept' – in this case, a characterization of the bank as an 'information-processing factory' – a place where the bank's economists collaborate in

interpreting, through the medium of writing and texts, the meanings of statistical data, these meanings eventually being converted into specialized economic knowledge, which in turn is conveyed in non-mathematical written discourse to the governor of the bank and his senior colleagues for use in making decisions about the country's monetary policy. Here is how the executive described this collaborative knowledge-building:³

What this place is when it comes to monetary policy is a big information-processing factory, structured like a pyramid. Enormous amounts of information come in at the bottom – all sorts of statistics covering a wide range of territory: financial markets, product markets, factor markets, and so on. And what we do is channel this information upwards through the different levels in the organization, distilling and synthesizing it. As the information moves upwards, through increasingly senior staff, it's analyzed in ways that are more and more pertinent to the decisions the Governing Council has to take, with people asking themselves: 'What are the implications of this information? What does it mean for the job that we do, *for conducting monetary policy*? And given that the analysis has to get transported from level to level, the question is, 'Well, how's it going to get done?' And there's been a very great reliance put on the written page around this institution.

When I saw this passage in the transcript, representing, in Geertz's terms, an experience-near concept, I was struck by its resonance with an experience-distant concept conceived by Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979): the 'inscription' of scientific knowledge, a concept derived from Latour's observations of the work of scientists and technicians in a research laboratory in California, observations conducted over a two-year period. Latour and Woolgar used the term 'inscription' to refer to the process of collaborative knowledge-building that occurs in many research-intensive professional organizations. Within this type of organization, empirical data reflecting some aspect of the external world relevant to the organization's mandate is progressively analysed, collaboratively and with the use of relevant theories, in a sequence of texts – here taken to include both documents and other semiotic forms such as graphs and numerical tables. During this collaborative work, successive interpretations of the data are negotiated among members of the organization, which eventually leads to a consensual knowledge claim that is presented in a research report, published in a scientific journal and possibly accepted in due course by the larger research community.

What I find significant about this parallel between, on the one hand, the bank executive's metaphorical description of the collaborative process of analysing statistical data and of transforming it, through the medium of writing and texts, into specialized knowledge used by the Bank's the senior executives in making monetary policy decisions and, on the other hand, Latour and Woolgar's notion of the inscription of knowledge is how this 'illuminating connection' helped me, as a non-specialist, to begin establishing a bridge into the conceptual world of the bank's economists. The association that I was able to make between the 'experience-near' concept articulated by the executive – the metaphor of the bank as an 'information-processing factory' – and Latour and Woolgar's 'experience-distant' concept of knowledge inscription gave me a foothold to begin exploring the conceptual landscape of the economists' work environment.

A related episode occurred a little later in my research. It began as I transcribed three interviews with senior economists. In each interview, I had asked the economist to talk about the Bank of Canada's work of monitoring the country's economy and directing its monetary policy. As I compared their respective descriptions of this work, I recognized a common theme: each of the economists talked of the institution's role as one of steering the economy on a course into the future, towards a particular goal:

When you're conducting monetary policy, you have to think of three questions: First, where's the economy currently? Second, where do you want the economy to go? And third, how are you going to get there?

(Economist 1)

Decisions on monetary policy are taken in a forward-looking way. The whole process is about how to get the economy from where we are now, with the current inflation rate, to where we want to be, the inflation-control targets. To do this, we have to make decisions about the appropriate path of interest rates. So all the economic analysis coming up to us from the staff is used to address one question: 'Are we on track?' As new information comes in, it changes one's views, and if evidence piles up that we're not on track, then at some point the [senior decision-makers] will have to make a decision about changing the policy.

(Economist 2)

Essentially, what the monetary-policy process does is this: you've got an objective; you say, for example: 'Here's where we want the economy to be in three years, at 2 per cent inflation.' So each quarter there are some new events. And you say, 'OK, given these events, given what we think is going to happen over the near term, and given how we figure the economy works, what path for interest rates will get us to our target?' Now obviously there could be several paths. But we want a smooth landing when we get to the target point; we'd like the economy to come in at that point, not run past it.

(Economist 3)

I found this common theme in the three interviews to be significant in two ways. The first is that it serves as a prime example of what Geertz (1983) calls 'convergent data': shared perspectives among the 'multiply connected individuals' within a social group – part of 'a mutually reinforcing network of social understandings' (pp. 156–157). Such instances of convergent data often point to an important constituent of a group's shared conceptual world.

Second, I was struck by another theoretical parallel, this time involving a passage from Edwin Hutchins' (1993) paper 'Learning to navigate', in which he discusses the concept of the 'activity system' (Cole and Engeström, 1993): a local, historically and culturally situated sphere of collaborative endeavour, in which thinking, knowing, and learning are distributed across a number of people and their work practices and, at the same time, mediated by a repertoire of culturally constructed tools, all with the larger aim of accomplishing communally defined goals (Smart, 2003). In the relevant passage from Hutchins' paper that I remembered, he gives the example of an activity system known as the 'fix cycle', which is enacted collaboratively by crew members of a large ship as it heads into a harbour. Several crew members located in different parts of the ship simultaneously take the bearings of landmarks in the harbour entrance; this information is then reported by telephone to the pilot house, where another crew member records it on a navigation chart and performs directional calculations to guide the ship's helmsman. Hutchins elaborates upon the larger aim of the fix cycle:

The central computations in navigation answer the questions, Where are we? and If we proceed in a certain way for a specified time, where will we be? Answering the first question is called 'fixing the position' or getting a fix. Answering the second is called 'dead reckoning'. It is necessary to answer the first in order to answer the second, and it is necessary to answer the second to keep the ship out of danger. This is especially true for large ships that lack maneuverability. In order to make a turn in restricted waters in a big ship, it is not good enough to know when one has reached the point where the ship is to make the turn. Because of the lag in

maneuvering response of such a massive object, when a ship reaches the turn point, if it has not already taken action to make the turn, it is too late to do so.

(p. 39)

Again, I was able to make an ‘illuminating connection’ between the ‘experience-near’ concept used by the three economists in describing the bank’s role of directing Canada’s monetary policy as one of steering the country’s economy on a course into the future and the ‘experience-distant’ concept of the activity system, as illustrated by Hutchins’ example of the ship and its navigational ‘fix cycle’. Just as Hutchins used the theoretical idea of the activity system to depict how knowledge required for navigating a large ship into harbour was collaboratively created and applied through multi-individual observations and acts of reasoning mediated by cultural tools, so the notion of the activity system offers a way of conceptualizing the bank’s activity of knowledge-building and policy-making. The conduct of monetary policy can be viewed as an activity system in which bank economists collaborate in repeatedly taking ‘sightings’ of significant trends in statistical data on the Canadian economy and then interpreting these trends by using a set of written genres, together with analytical tools such as computer-run economic models, to produce specialized knowledge that is applied by the Bank’s senior decision-makers in taking actions to influence the future course of the nation’s economy. This was an important step in my research, in that looking at the bank’s monetary policy process as an activity system, together with the recognition of the institution’s collaborative analytical activity as a process of knowledge inscription, allowed me to see, and then to describe in an ethnographic account, important aspects of the bank’s approach to knowledge-building and policy-making, while also providing a framework for analysing other related data as I collected it.

Further reading

- Farah, I. (1998) ‘The ethnography of communication’, in N. Hornberger and P. Corson (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*. Volume 8: *Research Methods in Language and Education*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, pp. 125–127.
- Hammersley, M., and Atkinson, P. (1985) *Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.
- Geertz, C. (1983) *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gumperz, J. and Hymes, D. (eds.) *Directions in Sociolinguistics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.
- Saville-Troike, M. (1982). *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackford.

Notes

- 1 Descriptions of these alternative approaches to ethnography can be found in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln, 2000).
- 2 The phrase “thick description” has been taken by some methodologists and researchers to refer simply to a highly detailed account of a particular culture – an understandable inference, given the face meaning of the phrase. However, a close look at Geertz’s methodological writing and his own ethnographic accounts reveals his intention to give the phrase the more specific meaning ascribed to it in this chapter.
- 3 The excerpts of interview transcripts included in the chapter have been edited to remove false starts, hesitations, fillers, and redundancy.

References

- Agar, M. (1980) *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*. New York: Academic Press.
- Anderson, N. (1940) *Men on the Move*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Asad, T. (1973) *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. Dryden, NY: Ithaca Press.
- Auty, K. and Briggs, D. (2004) 'Koori court, Victoria: magistrates court (Koori Court) Act 2002', *Law, Text, Culture*, 8: 7–37.
- Bateson, G. (1936) *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn From Three Points of View*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bauman, R. (1974) 'Speaking in the light: The role of the Quaker minister', in R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (eds.) *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 144–162.
- Bauman, R. (1983) *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism and Silence among Seventeenth Century Quakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloomfield, L. (1933) *Language*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Boas, F. (1897) 'The social organization and the secret societies of the Kwakiutl Indians', *Report of the U.S. National Museum for 1897*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, pp. 311–738.
- Burke, K. (1989) *On Symbols and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Canale, M. and Swain, M. (1980) 'Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing', *Applied Linguistics*, 1: 1–47.
- Candlin, C. and Mercer, N. (eds) (2001) *English Language Teaching in Its Social Context: A Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Cazden, C., John, V., and Hymes, D. (eds.) (1972) *Functions of Language in the Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Chomsky, N. (1957) *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague/Paris: Mouton.
- Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. (eds.) (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Denzin, N. (1997) *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) (2000) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ervin-Tripp, S. (1964) 'An analysis of the interaction of language, topic, and listener', *American Anthropologist*, 66: 86–102.
- Farah, I. (1992) *Literacy Practices in a Rural Community in Pakistan*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, PA, USA.
- Farah, I. (1998) 'The ethnography of communication', in N. Hornberger and P. Corson (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Language and Education: Volume 8: Research Methods in Language and Education*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, pp. 125–127.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1983) *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books.
- Glaser, B. (2001) *The Grounded Theory Perspective: Conceptualization Contrasted with Description*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine.
- Goetz, J. and Breneman, E. (1988) 'Desegregation and black students' experiences in two rural southern elementary schools', *Elementary School Journal*, 88: 489–502.
- Gumperz, J. (1972) *Language in Social Groups*. Palo Alto, CA: University of Stanford Press.
- Gumperz, J. and Hymes, D. (eds.) (1964) Special issue of *American Anthropologist*, 66.
- Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1985) *Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.
- Heath, S. B. (1980) *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hess, G. (1991) *School Restructuring, Chicago Style*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hutchins, E. (1983) 'Learning to navigate', in S. Chaiklin and J. Lave (eds.) *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, pp. 35–63.
- Hymes, D. (1962) 'The ethnography of speaking', in T. Gladwin and W. Sturtevant (eds.) *Anthropology and Human Behavior*. Washington, DC: The Anthropology Society of Washington, pp. 13–53.
- Hymes, D. (1967) 'Models of the interaction of language and social setting', *Journal of Social Issues*, 23: 8–28.
- Hymes, D. (1972) 'Models of the interactions of language and social life', in J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds.) *Directions in Sociolinguistics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, pp. 35–71.

- Hymes, D. (1981) *In Vain I Tried to Tell You: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hymes, D. (2003) *Now I Know Only So Far: Essays in Ethnopoetics*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Irvin-Tripp, S. (1964) 'An analysis of the interaction of language, topic, and listener', *American Anthropologist*, 66: 86–102.
- Jackell, R. (1988) *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jafarey, A. (2009) 'Conversations with kidney vendors in Pakistan: an ethnographic study', *Hastings Center Report*, 39: 29–44.
- Johnstone, B. and Marcellino, W. (2010) 'Dell Hymes and the ethnography of communication', in B. Johnstone, R. Wodak, and P. Kerswill (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 57–66.
- Jordan, J. (2005) 'Dell Hymes, Kenneth Burke's "identification", and the birth of sociolinguistics', *Rhetoric Review*, 24: 264–279.
- Keating, E. (2001) 'The ethnography of communication', in P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J., L. Lofland, and L. Lofland (eds.) *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 285–301.
- Labov, W. (1966) *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Latour, B. and Woolgar, S. (1979) *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- LeCompte, M. and Preissle, J. (1993) *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. Second Edition. New York: Academic Press.
- Liebow, E. (1966) *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company.
- Lynd, H. and Lynd, R. (1937) *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company.
- Malinowski, B. (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Mead, M. (1928) *Coming of Age in Samoa*. New York: Morrow.
- Merriam, S. (1988) *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mountz, A. and Wright, R. (1996) 'Daily life in the transnational migrant community of San Agustín, Oaxaca and Poughkeepsie, New York', *Diaspora*, 5: 403–428.
- Orr, J. (1996) *Talking About Machines: An Ethnography of a Modern Job*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Philips, S. (1983) *The Invisible Culture: Communication in Classroom and Community on the Warm Springs Reservation*. New York: Longman.
- Philipsen, G. (1992) *Speaking Culturally: Explorations in Social Communication*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Prior, P. (1998) *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Richardson, F. and Walker, C. (1948) *Human Relations in an Expanding Company: A Study of the Manufacturing Departments in the Endicott Plant of the International Business Machines Corporation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Labor Management Center.
- Savignon, S. (1983) *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Saville-Troike, M. (1982) *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackford.
- Schütz, A. (1974) *Collected Papers: The Problem of Social Reality*. New York: Springer.
- Scollon, R. and Scollon, S. (1979) *Linguistic Convergence: An Ethnography of Speaking at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta*. New York: Academic Press.
- Sherzer, J. (1974) 'Namakke, Sunmakke, Komakki: Three types of cuna speech event', in R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (eds.) *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 263–282.
- Sherzer, J. (1983) *Kuna Ways of Speaking: An Ethnographic Perspective in Contemporary Israel*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Slobin, D. (1967) *A Field Manual for Cross-Cultural Study of the Acquisition of Communicative Competence*. Berkeley, CA: Language Behavior Research Lab.
- Smart, G. (2003) 'A central bank's "communications strategy": the interplay of activity, discourse genres and technology in a time of organizational change', in C. Bazerman and D. Russell (eds.) *Writing Selves/ Writing Societies: Research From Activity Perspectives*. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse and *Mind, Culture, & Activity*.
- Smart, G. (2006) *Writing the Economy: Activity, Genre and Technology in the World of Banking*. London: Equinox.

- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Swales, J. (1998) *Other Floors, Other Voices: A Textography of a Small University Building*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988) *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vidich, A. and Lyman, S. (1998) 'Qualitative methods: their history in sociology and anthropology', in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds.) *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 41–110.
- Whyte, W. F. (1943) *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.