



## Research Article

# Language, Culture, and Ethnography of Communication

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**Abstract.** Language reflects the realities of human life activities. As social beings, humans require communication, which functions effectively when facilitated by language. Therefore, language influences human thought patterns. Polite language, a hallmark of Indonesian culture, has been passed down through generations, underscoring the close relationship between language and culture. Effective language expression is also supported by good literacy understanding. This study aims to explain language use in society through the Ethnography of Communication approach, emphasizing the importance of context in interpreting speech and its functions. Linguists have traditionally found it easy to explain sentences from grammatical and semantic perspectives but often struggle with the intention and functional use of speech. Ethnography of Communication seeks to address this gap by

incorporating aspects of speech or communication, thus making linguistic components more comprehensive. The research method used was a literature study, with library materials serving as the primary data source. The findings indicate that language was structured according to patterns, not randomly, but within subsystems such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. These patterns correspond to the needs and functions of each societal group. Ethnography of Communication examines the communication patterns of a community or cultural society, highlighting the role of language in the communicative behaviour of a society and how language was used within different cultures.

**Keywords:** Language, Culture, Ethnography, Communication.

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesian society encompasses a wide variety of ethnic groups, each with its own unique customs, religions, and languages, creating both vertical and horizontal distinctions. Vertically, the ethnic groups in Indonesia exhibit differences that characterize and distinguish them from one another. These differences are evident in the economic and technological development of each ethnic community within Indonesia. Horizontally, the distinctions between these ethnic groups can be seen in the various cultural elements unique to each community.

Each ethnic group typically has its own customs that differ from one another. However, the aim of these customs is the same: to educate community members to be virtuous, courteous, maintain social harmony, and act kindly towards each other. Customs are concepts that reflect the predominant beliefs and values of a society's members about what they consider valuable, important, and significant in life. These customs serve as guidelines that provide direction and orientation for the community's way of life (Koenjaningrat, 2009).

Ethnography of communication is an approach used to analyze discourse. It is also a research method employed in qualitative studies. While ethnography is related to anthropology, ethnography of communication differs from linguistic anthropology because it focuses on communicative behaviors that involve both language and culture. Simply put, ethnography of communication examines the role of language in the communicative behaviors of a society, specifically how language is used within different cultural contexts (Kuswarno, 2008). Specifically, ethnography of communication generates hypotheses about the various ways in which sociocultural phenomena within a society relate to communication patterns or ways of speaking. The focus of ethnography of communication is the communicative behaviors of a community, which are often influenced by sociocultural aspects such as interaction norms and cultural rules. To describe and analyze the communication patterns within a society, the initial step was to identify recurring communication events. The next step was to inventory the components that make up these communication events and then determine the relationships among these components. Therefore, to provide a clearer understanding, this paper will discuss "Language, Culture, and Ethnography of Communication."

## RESEARCH METHOD

Based on its type, this research was literature-based and falls under the category of library research. Library research involved a series of activities related to the method of collecting library data, reading, noting, and processing materials found in libraries without the need for fieldwork (Zed, 2008). In this type of research, data was collected by gathering information from various literatures. The literature reviewed was not limited to books but also included documentation materials, magazines, journals, and newspapers, which serve as the primary data sources in the research process.

The focus of library research was to discover new theories, formulate laws, principles, opinions, and other ideas that could be used to analyse and solved the research problem.

This study employed a qualitative approach, focusing its analysis on the process of drawing comparisons and analysing the dynamics of relationships between observed phenomena using scientific logic (Azmar, 2001).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Language and Culture

#### a. Language

Widjono emphasizes that language was a sound-symbol system of utterance used for communication by its users. It was employed in various environments, levels, and diverse purposes, such as scientific, business, work-related, social, and cultural communication. Consistent with the definition of language, Kridalaksana, as cited in Chaer, defines language as an arbitrary sound-symbol system used by social groups to cooperate, communicate, and identify themselves (Chaer, 2003). As a language system, it is also systematic. This means that language is structured according to a pattern, not randomly. In other words, language is not a singular system but composed of subsystems, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Meanwhile, "arbitrary" here means there is no obligatory connection between language symbols (in the form of sound) and the concepts or meanings intended by those symbols.

In general, the function of language is as a tool for communication among members of society. Nababan explains that when examined in relation to society, language functions can be categorized into four groups: (1) cultural, (2) societal, (3) individual, and (4) educational (Nababan, 1993). These four functions are interrelated because individuals are members of society who live within it according to the cultural patterns inherited and developed through education.

As social beings, humans cannot live in isolation. To fulfil their needs, individuals require cooperation with others, especially considering the multitude and diversity of human needs. They needed to communicate in various environments wherever they are located.

#### b. Culture

The nature of culture was highly complex, leading experts to provide varying definitions, understandings, and boundaries. Wilson, as cited in Siberani, states that

culture was knowledge transmitted and disseminated socially, encompassing both existential, normative, and symbolic aspects reflected in human behaviours and artifacts.

Meanwhile, Koentjaraningrat formulated the framework of culture with two aspects: (1) the form of culture, which consists of ideas, behaviours, and concrete physical culture, and (2) the content of culture, which includes language, technological systems, economic systems, social organizations, knowledge systems, religious systems, and artistic systems (Sibarani, 1992).

From several definitions of culture, we could find a common foundation: that human beings, with all their various attributes, were distinct from other creatures. Culture was consistently viewed as something unique to humans, thus always associated with beauty, freedom, and nobility.

#### c. Language in Culture

Language and culture had a coordinative relationship, which was a relationship of equals with a very high position. Masinambouw, as cited in Chaer, states that culture and language were systems inherent to humans. In other words, culture was a system inherent to humans that regulates human interaction within society, while language was a system that serves as a means for these interactions to take place (Chaer, 1995).

The relationship between language and culture had also been discussed by D. Bloomfield, Harris, and Voegeli, as mentioned in Oka's work. According to them, language, when viewed from an external perspective, served as both a tool and a container of culture in the form of linguistic activities, whether in written or oral form (Oka, 1992).

The relationship between language and culture was indeed very close, often making it difficult to identify the relationship between the two because they influenced each other, complement each other, and coexist. According to Nababan, there were two types of relationships between language and culture: (1) language was a part of culture (phylogenetic), and (2) individuals learned culture through their language (ontogenetic). Meanwhile, Sibrani further delineated the functions of language in culture into three: (1) as a means of cultural development, (2) as a conduit for cultural transmission, and (3) as an inventory of cultural characteristics (Sibarani, 1992).

A new culture can only be conveyed and understood if its cultural elements have names or terms. Naming or terminology was language. Every cultural element, from the smallest to the largest, was given a name or term. In the process of learning and teaching culture, these names or terms were essential. Giving names to cultural elements also served to inventory that culture. The results of cultural inventories can be beneficial for the development of culture, especially concerning the dissemination, teaching, and learning of culture.

#### d. Language Influences Culture

Many language and culture experts assert that the two were interconnected, and according to the Sapir-Whorf theory, language influences culture. They state this because what language users expressed reflects the habits of the speaker. For example, to express time, Indonesia was known for 'rubber time' because the Indonesian

language did not indicate a clear 'time boundary'. Furthermore, the word 'later' here also does not have a clear time boundary. That's why it could be on the same day or the next day or the day after that, which was unclear when (Hodidjah, 2015).

In the Sapir-Whorf theory, these habits arise from language, thus asserting that language influenced culture (habits). In English-speaking societies not accustomed to eating rice, they did not have a complete vocabulary to express rice, grains, and rice. In the English language, there was only one word for all of these, namely "rice". Another example was in Eskimo communities who had a cultural history of living in snow, while in the Indonesian language, there was only one word "salju" to express snow with its various types.

#### e. Culture Influences Language

It was not always the case that language influences culture. Sometimes, culture influenced language. It was quite normal that the Sapir-Whorf theory was still being questioned today. In fact, in everyday actions, most cultures exist before language. For example, in Acehnese society, the tool used for plowing fields was called "langlai". The object (langlai) initially had no name, but after the tool was created and became a habit for people to plow fields with it, only then did a name (language) emerge to refer to the object.

Another important aspect to consider in communication was that linguistic etiquette must align with cultural norms. If it did not align with cultural norms, individuals were often accused of being strange, selfish, arrogant, indifferent, lacking in manners, and uncultured. According to Nababan, linguistic etiquette regulates (1) what we should say in certain times and situations, (2) what language variety was appropriate to use in specific sociolinguistic situations, (3) when and how we should take turns speaking and interrupting others, and (4) when we should and should not speak (Nababan, 1993).

Linguistic etiquette was associated with the use of language as a communication system. Loud voices accompanying verbal signs when communicating with superiors may be considered impolite. However, this was understood if the speaker was from the Batak ethnic group. It was appropriate that when greeting our superiors in the morning at the office, we say, "Good morning, Sir/Madam," and it was not appropriate to say "How are you, Sir/Madam," because those words were more suitable for someone of the same level as the speaker and have a casual tone.

This means that someone's linguistic etiquette was influenced by the cultural norms of their ethnic group or specific community. This indicates that culture, which was deeply ingrained, greatly influences an individual's language. That is why it was necessary for us to study or understand cultural norms before or alongside learning language.

### Communication Ethnography

Communication ethnography was initially referred to as speech ethnography or ethnography of speaking. If ethnography was viewed as a study that characterizes a society or ethnicity, then in communication ethnography, the focus was on the language of the community or group of people. The term "Ethnography of speaking"

was initially introduced by Dell Hymes, an American anthropologist and linguistics expert (Sumarsono & Partana, 2002).

According to Hymes, in examining the use of language in society, attention should be paid to and consider the contextual situation so that language did not stand alone as in the study of grammar (as done by linguists), personality (as in psychology), social structure (as in sociology), religion (as in ethnology), and so on.

To understand communication ethnography, Hymes suggests the need to change orientation towards language, which encompasses 7 points: (1) structure or system (*la parole*), (2) function more than structure, (3) language as an order that in many ways contains functions, and different functions indicate different perspectives and orders, (4) the accuracy of the message to be conveyed, (5) the diversity of functions of various languages and other communication tools, (6) context (communication) or other social contexts as a starting point for understanding, and (7) the functions themselves are strengthened in context. According to Hymes, to study speech ethnography, it was necessary to understand several related important concepts, namely (1) ways of speaking, (2) speech community, and (3) situations, events, and speech acts.

a. Ways of Speaking

Ways of speaking entailed the ideas, communication events within the speech community. Within a speech community, there were patterns of speech activities that also depict an individual's communicative competence. Ways of speaking referred to the relationship between speech events, speech acts, and style. Ways of speaking vary between cultures, even on fundamental aspects. For instance, in Javanese families, young individuals engaged in conversation with their elders were not allowed to interrupt their speech unless asked or given permission. Even if the child had an opportunity during a "pause" in conversation, they typically start their utterance with a polite tone, such as "nuwun sewu" (asking for a thousand apologies) (Iswatiningsih, 2009).

b. Speech community

Speech community or "guyup tutur" as defined by John Lyons was interpreted as all individuals who use a particular language or dialect. Charles Hockett stated that each language determines a speech community, and a speech community was defined as a group of people who communicate with each other, directly or indirectly, through language. Gumperz explains that a speech community was a group of people with distinctive characteristics due to regular and repeated interaction using the same verbal signs, and different from other groups due to significant differences in language usage (Sumarsono, 2002). These definitions imply that speech communities may overlap if they were bilingual and do not require social and cultural unity to group them. This aligns with Saville-Troike's view that fundamentally, each speaker was not only a member of one speech community but can be a member of two speech communities or different speech communities.

Unlike some opinions mentioned above, defining a speech community should be directed towards the scope possessed by 'society' according to three criteria. First, it encompassed any group within society that shares something significant in common (including religion, ethnicity, race, age, gender, occupation). Second, it

constitutes a physical boundary unit of people who had full role opportunities (such as politically organized tribes or nations, but not of one gender, age, class). Third, it comprises a collection of entities in the same place that shared something in common (such as the Western World, developing countries, the UN, etc.) (Sumarsono, 1994). Thus, it was challenging to identify a linguistically homogeneous community, but as a societal collectively, it encompassed a range of language varieties that pattern in its relation to social and cultural communication dimensions.

Therefore, in the dimension of research, social units can be selected at different levels. Each community within a complex society can be viewed as part of a larger society or divided into smaller groups, such as community groups within a neighbourhood association (RT), a school, a factory, or a society, and so forth. Thus, the complexity of society entails the consequence that individuals may engage in multiple professions in their daily lives. This made it possible for someone to belong to different speech communities (Iswatiningsih, 2009).

The relationship among members in a speech community was not only characterized by the similarity of language forms used but was also determined by their views or perceptions of the language forms used, both by members and other communities. Thus, it led to attitudes and evaluations towards the speech community communicating, for example, the Madurese community, especially in the Sumenep region, is perceived as a speech community that possesses refined variations of the Madurese language. Similarly, the Javanese speech community in the Solo-Jogya dialect perceives that the language variations they use are higher compared to the Javanese dialects of East Java, Banyumas, Tegal. As for the Malang community, they were known for the 'walikan' language, a language that is reversed, for example, the word 'makan' becomes 'nakam', 'pulang' becomes 'ngalup', 'arek Malang' becomes 'kera ngalam', and so on, although the Malang community did not universally apply the same language in 'walikan'.

#### c. Situations, events, and speech acts

To study communicative behaviour within a speech community, it was necessary to link it to units of interaction, as stated by Hymes in three hierarchical units: speech situation, speech event, and speech act. Hymes described speech situations as 'situations associated with (or marked by the absence of) speech' (Ibrahim, 1994). Speech situations were also defined as the context in which communication occurs. Examples of speech situations included ceremonies, hunting, dining, auctions, classroom settings, and so forth. Speech situations were not always communicative; they may consist of communicative events and other events.

Speech events were communicative and were governed by norms for speech use. Speech events occurred within speech situations and consist of one or more speech acts (Sumarsono, 2002). For example, consider a wedding party or a birthday celebration as an illustration of the presence of speech situations, speech events, and speech acts. During such gatherings (as speech situations), conversations take place throughout the event with various people, on various topics, and there may also be jokes or humour involved (speech events).

Speech acts were sentences or statements expressed to convey the meaning and purpose of speech. Hymes stated that speech acts are the smallest unit in the

hierarchy, representing the simplest yet most challenging level. They were the simplest because they are the minimal level in the analytical framework, yet they are the most challenging because their meaning in ethnographic communication differed from their meaning in pragmatics and philosophy, and because speech acts are not merely "minimal." Therefore, the study of speech acts was often more complex compared to the other two concepts that comprise ethnographic communication.

For instance, Austin asserts that studying meaning should not focus solely on empty statements, such as 'Snow is white', detached from context because language is used in speech forms with various functions. When speaking, individuals provide advice, make promises, invite, request, prohibit, and so forth (Iswatiningsih, 2009). Thus, speech forms actions, and speech itself was an action. Utterances that form actions were called performative utterances; for example, 'I will come early' was a declarative sentence that expresses a promise or a commitment to arrive early. Conversely, statements that only report facts were called constative utterances. Additionally, apart from categorizing sentences based on their ability to form actions, Austin also distinguishes sentences based on the forces accompanying them, such as locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary forces. The locutionary force of an utterance is its basic meaning and reference (the meaning referred to by the utterance); the illocutionary force is the force generated by its use, such as complaints, praise, promises, commands, prohibitions, and so forth. Perlocutionary force refers to the effects or outcomes of the utterance on its hearer, whether tangible or anticipated.

## CONCLUSION

Language was a system of sound symbols used for communication by its users. Language functions as a communication tool that had a systematic pattern and was arbitrary, meaning there was no obligatory relationship between language symbols and the intended concepts. Language served cultural, societal, individual, and educational functions. Culture was transmitted social knowledge consisting of conceptual, behavioural, and physical aspects. The relationship between language and culture was very close and mutually influential. Language is considered part of culture and a means of cultural development and transmission.

Language influenced culture in that cultural habits arise from language. For example, the unclear concept of time in the Indonesian language reflected societal habits. Conversely, culture also influenced language, such as the creation of new terms for tools used in daily life. Language etiquette was influenced by cultural norms, which regulate how to speak in specific situations, the use of language varieties, turn-taking, and when to remain silent. This demonstrates the importance of understanding cultural norms for effective communication.

Communication ethnography, originally called speech ethnography, focuses on the use of language in society by considering situational contexts. One expert suggested changing the orientation towards language to understand communication in social contexts. Key concepts in communication ethnography included ways of speaking, speech communities, and situations, events, and speech acts. Ways of speaking reflected an individual's communicative competence in society. Speech



communities were groups that communicate with the same language. Situations, events, and speech acts were units of interaction in communication, with speech acts being the smallest unit covering speech actions such as promising, requesting, or prohibiting. Analysis of speech acts was important for understanding the meaning and function of language in everyday communication.

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