

**IN MEMORIAM
DELL H. HYMES**

Dell H. Hymes: An intellectual sketch

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We are all saddened by the death of Dell Hymes. Hymes was one of the leading figures in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, a pioneer who took the field in many new directions. These include the study of relations between and among language, culture, and society; language and literature; the ethnography of speaking and communication; the history of anthropology and linguistics; language history and language change; the role of language in creating and reflecting social inequalities; and the pidginization and creolization of languages. He was the founding editor of our journal, *Language in Society*. Among his many books (written alone, edited alone, or edited with others) are *Language in culture and society: A reader in linguistics and anthropology* (Hymes 1964a), *The ethnography of communication* (Gumperz & Hymes 1964), *Studies in Southwestern ethnolinguistics: Meaning and history in the languages of the American Southwest* (Hymes & Bittle 1967), *Pidginization and creolization of languages* (Hymes 1971), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (Gumperz & Hymes 1972), *Functions of language in the classroom* (Cazden et al. 1972), *Reinventing anthropology* (Hymes 1972a), *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach* (Hymes 1974a), *Studies in the history of linguistics: Traditions and paradigms* (Hymes 1974b), *Language in education: Ethnolinguistic essays* (Hymes 1980), *"In vain I tried to tell you:" Essays in Native American ethnopoetics* (Hymes 1981), *Essays in the history of linguistic anthropology* (Hymes 1983), *Ethnography, linguistics, and narrative inequality: Toward an understanding of voice* (Hymes 1996), and *Now I know only so far:*

Essays in ethno poetics (Hymes 2003). The significance of Hymes' career and the recognition of this by his colleagues are indicated by his having been elected president of the American Anthropological Association, the Linguistic Society of America, and the American Folklore Society.

Dell H. Hymes was born in Portland, Oregon in 1927.¹ He grew up there, attending Reed College, and began graduate work in anthropology at Indiana University in 1950, eventually receiving a doctorate instead in linguistics in 1955, with minors in anthropology and folklore. This constellation of interests would stay with Hymes throughout his career. Hymes' first faculty position was at Harvard University. He then moved to the University of California at Berkeley, where he was appointed in both anthropology and linguistics. In 1965, Hymes moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where he joined the faculty of the Department of Anthropology. There he trained what Stephen Murray (1998:133) has called the "second generation" of ethnographers of communication, whose work is represented in the influential anthology *Explorations in the ethnography of communication* co-edited by two of Hymes' students (Bauman & Sherzer 1974). At the University of Pennsylvania, Hymes was also affiliated with the Department of Folklore and Folklife and the Department of Sociology, and with the faculty in education. He became Dean of the University's College of Graduate Studies in Education in 1975. In 1987 he moved to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Virginia, from which he retired in 2000.

The birth of sociolinguistics was contemporaneous with the Chomskyan generative grammar movement. Dell Hymes was particularly critical of Chomsky's idea of linguistic competence and his failure to account for linguistic variation. Hymes proposed the term ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION to describe a new approach to understanding language in use (Hymes 1964b). Hymes aimed to move away from considering language in the abstract and toward investigating the diversity of speech as it is encountered in ethnographic fieldwork. The object of study Hymes proposed for linguistics was the WAY OF SPEAKING (Hymes 1989). Under the rubric of ways of speaking, Hymes offered a bipartite conception of speech that encompasses both the MEANS OF SPEECH available to speakers and the SPEECH ECONOMY these speakers participate in. Thus Hymes offered a theoretical basis for language study that accounts for both linguistic variation from individual to individual and relative linguistic coherence across the social realm, while also offering a methodological heuristic for investigating communication, which is often represented in terms of the well-known SPEAKING mnemonic.

Hymes was a student of American Indian languages, and by the time he began his doctoral dissertation fieldwork in the 1950s, many of these languages were dying out. All that was available, in many cases, were versions of tales and myths that had been written down by earlier anthropologists, usually in ways that conformed to the anthropologists' expectations about how folk tales and myths should look on the page. They were inert, decontextualized, and interesting in content but disconnected from the speech events that called them forth and

shaped them. Hymes' ETHNOPOETIC approach to this material was a theoretical framework and a set of methods for putting these tales and myths back into something like their original contexts (Hymes 1981). By reading closely, Hymes proposed to reveal the implicit structure of traditional Indian narratives, structure that would reveal much about how the narratives were embedded in and reflective of their cultural context. Particularly by looking at what happened when narrators "broke through" into full performances, an analyst could see something of what made things coherent in the culture—its aesthetic system, in other words, or its native ('ethno') poetics. Ethnopoetic work could both show the rest of the world what Native American verbal art was like and help recover lost knowledge about languages and cultures that were endangered or gone (Blommaert 2006).

Dell Hymes' work always had applied goals as well, having to do with making unheard voices and ways of speaking hearable. The major themes in Hymes' explicitly educational writings are the same as those in his work as a whole: the need for a view of language and linguistics broad enough that it has something to say and do about inequality, the significance and ubiquity of narrative poetics in the circulation of knowledge, and the importance of understanding linguistic behavior in its ethnographic context.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Hymes worked with other sociolinguists to create a new journal devoted to "the means of speech in human communities, and their meanings to those who use them" (Hymes 1972b:2; also this issue, pp. 317–330). The first issue of *Language in Society* appeared in April 1972, published, as it has been ever since, by Cambridge University Press, with Hymes as Editor. The Editorial Board included many of the people who have shaped contemporary sociolinguistics, among them William Bright, David Crystal, Charles A. Ferguson, Joshua Fishman, Allen D. Grimshaw, John J. Gumperz, William Labov, and Emanuel Schegloff. The first issue contained articles and research reports representing what would now be called variationist sociolinguistics (William Labov on data-collection methods, David Decamp on hypercorrection as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, R. B. LePage on the Sociolinguistic Survey of Multilingual Communities in the Caribbean, Gillian Sankoff and Henrietta Cedergren on sociolinguistic research on French in Montréal), ethnography of communication (Roger D. Abrahams on "The training of the man of words in talking sweet," Keith H. Basso on folk taxonomies and cultural rules involving ice and travel in an American Indian group, William J. Samarin on religious glossolalia), language attitudes (C. R. Seligman, G. R. Tucker, and W. E. Lambert on the effects of speech style on teachers' attitudes toward pupils), and interactional sociolinguistics (John J. Gumperz on the communicative competence of bilinguals), as well as articles on ethnobotany (Brent Berlin) and nonverbal aspects of communication (Roman Jakobson).

Dell Hymes was indubitably one of the most important figures in the history of sociolinguistics: a founding member of the sociolinguistics movement, the originator of the ethnography of communication, a pioneer in ethnopoetics, and a

champion in linguistics for those who have been silenced in Western educational, anthropological, and linguistic traditions. Tracing Dell Hymes' career offers a window on the birth and development of sociolinguistics as a whole. The particular cluster of early influences on Hymes—Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Roman Jakobson, and Kenneth Burke—as well as Hymes' resulting resistance to Chomskyan linguistics, are representative of the sources of impetus for sociolinguistics in general. Hymes' foundational works in sociolinguistics are still being studied. Neither this journal nor the interdisciplinary field of endeavor it represents would have been possible without him.

NOTE

¹This sketch is partly abstracted from a chapter on Dell Hymes forthcoming in *The Sage handbook of sociolinguistics* (Johnstone & Marcellino in press).

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