An underlying assumption in sociolinguistics is that much of communication is directed toward keeping an individual society going; that is, an important function of communication is social maintenance. More recent views hold that language (along with other cultural behavior) does more than just that; it serves to construct and sustain social reality. Thus, the goals of sociolinguistics are not merely to understand the tacit rules and norms of language use that are culturally specific, but should encompass understanding how societies use language to construct those very societies.

One broad approach to researching the rules, cultural norms, and values that are intertwined with language use is ethnography. Ethnographic research is generally carried out through participant observation. Ethnographies are based on first-hand observations of behavior in a group of people in their natural setting. Investigators report on what they see and hear as they observe what is going on around them. As Duranti (1997, 85) says, ‘an 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.’ Ethnographers ask themselves what is happening and they try to provide accounts which show how the behavior that is being observed makes sense within the community that is being observed. As Johnstone (2004, 76) says, ethnography ‘presupposes … that the best explanations of human behavior are particular and culturally relative’ rather than general and universal. Such studies are also qualitative rather than quantitative. In ethnographies of speaking the focus is on the language the participants are using and the cultural practices such language reflects.

Canagarajah (2006, 155) observes that: 'Ethnographers expect to live for an extensive period of time in the community they are studying in order to capture first-hand its language patterns and attitudes. As much as possible, they try not to alter the “natural” flow of life and social relationships of the community, but understand how language works in everyday life.' They are participant-observers and must deal with the basic conundrum of participant observation, which Trusting and Maybin (2007, 578–9) explain as follows: ‘Ethnographic work normally requires the researcher to be actively involved in the social action under study, suggesting that this generates insights which cannot be achieved in any other way. But the involvement of the researcher in social action inevitably changes the language practices under study.’ This issue may also become more and more important as differences increase between the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the observer and the observed. It is certainly one that must be confronted by both those who publish ethnographies and those who read them. Mendoza-Denton (2008, 48) addresses this issue directly near the beginning of her ethnographic study of teenage Latina girl groups in a California high school:

No ethnographer is a blank notepad just as no linguist is a tape recorder. The perceptual filters that we bring to fieldwork situations are powerful indeed, and not always conscious. You will read in the following chapters an account that is my interpretation of years of fieldwork and research with a group of young people who allowed me into their lives, and I will invite you to draw your own conclusions. I have been and will be providing guideposts to show where my ethnographic interpretation might be guided by factors such as my background, social class, and my own subjective and affective reactions to people around me and to events at the time.

She constantly reminds us in her report of the circumstances in which she collected her data and of her involvement in the process.

Three illustrative book-length ethnographic studies are those of Sherzer (1983), Hill and Hill (1986), and Mendoza-Denton (2008). Sherzer describes how the Kuna of Panama use language: their public language of the gathering house, and their use of language in curing and music, in rites and festivities, and in everyday conversation. He points out that the Kuna wait very patiently to take their turns in speaking so that interruptions and overlaps in conversation are rare events.

Hill and Hill describe how the Malinche of Central Mexico use language in their daily lives and in their continuing struggle to preserve their linguistic and cultural
identity. Spanish is constantly encroaching on their own language so they have deliberately tried to maintain certain of its features in an almost ‘purist’ way.

Mendoza-Denton (2008) offers an account of Latina gangs in a California high school. She calls the school, which is located in the San Francisco Bay area, Sor Juana High School. She describes the students as a mixture of well-to-do Euro-Americans, African Americans, Pacific Islanders, Asians, Asian-Americans, and Latinas/Latinos. She was particularly interested in this last group, especially the girls. She focused her research on the Norteñas and the Sureñas, two rival Latina gangs. She studied these groups in depth, having become over a period of time the confidant of members of both groups. She found a strong ideological divide between the groups. The Norteñas were ‘northern’-oriented, preferred to speak English, wore red accessories and red lipstick, ‘feathered’ their hair, favored Motown Oldie music and the numbers XIV, 14, and 4, and, though Hispanic, were mainly US-born. In contrast, the Sureñas were ‘southern’ (i.e., more Mexican)-oriented, preferred to speak Spanish, wore blue accessories and brown lipstick, ponytailed their hair, favored Mexican bands, pop music, and the numbers XIII, 13, and 3, and were mainly recent immigrants. Mendoza-Denton shows how the members of each group express and reinforce their identities through their various practices and some of the linguistic consequences of such behavior. For example, she found that the preferred use of English or Spanish sometimes concealed a very good knowledge of the dispreferred other language, and that certain linguistic features of Spanish varied according to strength of commitment to the gangs. Mendoza-Denton’s study ranges over a wide variety of issues and is a mine of suggestions and insights.

It is important to remember, however, that these studies represent the results of lengthy and time-consuming ethnographic projects. It is also possible to do smaller-scale studies using participant observation, focusing on very specific types of interactions in a group and particular linguistic features. For example, a seminal work by Frake (1964) focuses on how to ask for a drink; while this study makes uses of the author’s extensive knowledge of the culture, it is illustrative of how a narrowly focused question about linguistic behavior can lead to an insightful analysis of cultural norms. Another important early study by Mitchell-Kernan (1972) discusses particular ways of speaking among some African Americans referred to as ‘marking’ and ‘signifying,’ focusing on how cultural knowledge is needed to interpret certain types of implied meanings. A third study which shows this specific focus is Basso (1970), who discusses the meanings of silence in Western Apache. Students wishing to do ethnographic research should note that although a deep understanding of the cultures is necessary for the interpretation of the data in all cases, focusing on very specific elements of communication helps to constrain the scope of these projects.

In the rest of this chapter, we will outline three ethnographic approaches which have been part of the field of sociolinguistics. The first, ethnography of communication, is the main focus of this chapter, as it is by far the most influential and longstanding use of ethnographic concepts and methodologies in the discipline of sociolinguistics. We will also briefly cover ethnomethodology, which we will then take up again in chapter 11 when we delve more deeply into a type of discourse
analysis called conversation analysis, which is derived from ethnomethodology. Finally, we will outline the approach called linguistic ethnography, which is a more recently introduced approach in sociolinguistics.

**Explanation 9.1: Cultural Norms in Idioms**

In English, we have sayings about how people use language that reveal certain attitudes about language and particular types of speakers. For instance, we say ‘Children should be seen and not heard’ and ‘Loose lips sink ships.’ There is a clear trend of sayings which value silence as well as discretion, as in ‘Speech is silver, silence is golden’ and ‘Still waters run deep’ (however, linguist Rick Hallett has reported that his grandmother would extend this idiom as follows: ‘... and are damn dirty, and the devil lies at the bottom.’) What idioms do you know about language, in English or any other language? What do they imply about the role of language in society or the desired linguistic behavior of (particular groups of) speakers?

**The Ethnography of Communication**

As discussed in chapter 1, the study of language involves more than just describing the syntactic composition of sentences or specifying their propositional content. Sociolinguists are interested in the various things that people do with that language.

**Communicative competence**

The term communicative competence (introduced in chapter 1) is sometimes used to describe the knowledge of how to use language in culturally appropriate ways. This term was suggested by Hymes (1972) as a counter-concept to Chomsky’s linguistic competence, which focused on an ideal hearer-speakers’ knowledge of grammaticality of sentences in their native language. Hymes maintained that knowledge of a language involved much more than that. Gumperz (1972, 205) explains the term as follows: ‘Whereas linguistic competence covers the speaker’s ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, communicative competence describes his ability to select, from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behavior in specific encounters.’

Working with an ethnographic or functional approach, we may attempt to specify just what it means to be a competent speaker of a particular language. It is one thing...
to learn the language of the Subanun, but quite another to learn how to ask for a
drink in Subanun (see Frake 1964, mentioned above and discussed in more detail
below). To do the first you need a certain linguistic competence; to do the latter you
need communicative competence. As Saville-Troike (1996, 363) says:

Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may
or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom
one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what
nonverbal behaviors are appropriate in various contexts, what the routines for turn-
taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how
to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, how to enforce
discipline, and the like – in short, everything involving the use of language and other
communicative dimensions in particular social settings.

Hymes (1972, 279) has argued that, in learning a language, children not only
must learn how to construct sentences in that language but also must ‘acquire
knowledge of a set of ways in which sentences are used. From a finite experience of
speech acts and their interdependence with sociocultural features, they develop a
general theory of the speaking appropriate in their community, which they employ,
like other forms of tacit cultural knowledge (competence), in conducting and interpreting social life.’ Hymes provides some examples of the kinds of learning that are
involved:

They come to be able to recognize, for example, appropriate and inappropriate inter-
rogative behavior (e.g., among the Araucanians of Chile, that to repeat a question is
to insult; among the Tzeltal of Chiapas, Mexico, that a direct question is not properly
asked (and to be answered ‘nothing’); among the Cahinahua of Brazil, that a direct
answer to a first question implies that the answerer has not time to talk, a vague answer,
that the question will be answered directly the second time, and that talk can
continue).

In learning to speak we are also learning to communicate in ways appropriate to
the group in which we are doing that learning; this is sometimes called language
socialization. These ways differ from group to group; consequently, as we move
from one group to another or from one language to another, we must learn the new
ways if we are to fit into that new group or to use that new language properly. Com-
municative competence is therefore a key component of social competence.

A famous study which focuses on communicative competence is found in Frake
(1964); it outlines kinds of speech used in drinking encounters among the Subanun
of the Philippines. Such encounters are very important for gaining prestige and for
resolving disputes. Frake describes how talk, what he calls ‘drinking talk,’ proceeds
in such encounters, from the initial invitation to partake of drink, to the selection
of the proper topics for discussion and problems for resolution as drinking proceeds
competitively, and finally to the displays of verbal art that accompany heavy, ‘succ-
cessful’ drinking. Each of these stages has its own characteristics. Those who are the
most accomplished at drinking talk become the de facto leaders among the Subanun because successful talk during drinking may be used to claim or assert social leadership. Success gives one a certain right to manipulate others, because it is during such talk that important disputes are settled, for example, disputes which in other societies would have to be settled in the courts. Thus it is clearly not enough to merely be adept at the grammar of the language; you also have to understand the social appropriateness of different constructions. A framework for the systematic study of how talk is used in certain societies is presented in the next section.

**SPEAKING**

Hymes (1974) has proposed an ethnographic framework which takes into account the various factors that are involved in speaking. An ethnography of a communicative event is a description of all the factors that are relevant in understanding how that particular communicative event achieves its objectives. For convenience, Hymes uses the word SPEAKING as an acronym for the various factors he deems to be relevant. We will now consider these factors one by one (see also the link in our companion website to a short video explaining this acronym).

The **setting and scene** (S) of speech are important. Setting refers to the time and place, that is, the concrete physical circumstances in which speech takes place. Scene refers to the abstract psychological setting, or the cultural definition of the occasion. The Queen of England’s Christmas message has its own unique setting and scene, as has the President of the United States’ annual State of the Union Address. A particular bit of speech may actually serve to define a scene, whereas another bit of speech may be deemed to be quite inappropriate in certain circumstances. Within a particular setting, of course, participants are free to change scenes, as they change the level of formality (e.g., go from serious to joyful) or as they change the kind of activity in which they are involved (e.g., begin to drink or to recite poetry).

The **participants** (P) include various combinations of speaker–listener, addressor–addressee, or sender–receiver. They generally fill certain socially specified roles. A two-person conversation involves a speaker and hearer whose roles change; a ‘dressing down’ involves a speaker and hearer with no role change; a political speech involves an addressor and addressees (the audience); and a telephone message involves a sender and a receiver. A prayer obviously makes a deity a participant. In a classroom, a teacher’s question and a student’s response involve not just those two as speaker and listener but also the rest of the class as audience, since they too are expected to benefit from the exchange.

**Ends** (E) refers to the conventionally recognized and expected outcomes of an exchange as well as to the personal goals that participants seek to accomplish on particular occasions. A trial in a courtroom has a recognizable social end in view, but the various participants, that is, the judge, jury, prosecution, defense, accused, and witnesses, have different personal goals. Likewise, a marriage ceremony serves
a certain social end, but each of the various participants may have his or her own unique goals in getting married or in seeing a particular couple married.

**Act sequence** (A) refers to the actual form and content of what is said: the precise words used, how they are used, and the relationship of what is said to the actual topic at hand. This is one aspect of speaking in which linguists have long shown an interest, particularly those who study discourse and conversation, and it is one about which we will have more to say in the next two chapters. Public lectures, casual conversations, and cocktail party chatter are all different forms of speaking; with each go different kinds of language and things talked about.

**Key** (K), the fifth term, refers to the tone, manner, or spirit in which a particular message is conveyed: light-hearted, serious, precise, pedantic, mocking, sarcastic, pompous, and so on. The key may also be marked non-verbally by certain kinds of behavior, gesture, posture, or even deportment. When there is a lack of fit between what a person is actually saying and the key that the person is using, listeners are likely to pay more attention to the key than to the actual content, for example, to the burlesque of a ritual rather than to the ritual itself.

**Instrumentalities** (I) refers to the choice of channel, for example, oral, written, signed, or telegraphic, and to the actual forms of speech employed, such as the language, dialect, code, or register that is chosen. Formal, written, legal language is one instrumentality; spoken Newfoundland English is another, as is American Sign Language; code-switching between English and Italian in Toronto is a third; and the use of Pig Latin is still another. In Suriname a high government official addresses a Bush Negro chief in Dutch and has his words translated into the local tribal language. The chief does the opposite. Each speaks this way although both could use a common instrumentality, Sranan. You may employ different instrumentalities in the course of a single verbal exchange of some length: first read something, then tell a dialect joke, then quote Shakespeare, then use an expression from another language, and so on. You also need not necessarily change topic to do any of these.

**Norms of interaction and interpretation** (N) refers to the specific behaviors and properties that attach to speaking and also to how these may be viewed by someone who does not share them (e.g., loudness, silence, gaze return, and so on). For example, there are certain norms of interaction with regard to church services and conversing with strangers. However, these norms vary from social group to social group, so the kind of behavior expected in congregations that practice ‘talking in tongues’ or the group encouragement of a preacher in others would be deemed abnormal and unacceptable in a ‘high’ Anglican setting, where the congregation is expected to sit quietly unless it is their time to participate in group prayer or singing. Likewise, a Brazilian and an Anglo-Saxon meeting for the first time are unlikely to find a conversational distance that each finds comfortable, as they may have different ideas about how close one stands when conversing with a stranger.

**Genre** (G), the final term, refers to clearly demarcated types of utterance; such things as poems, proverbs, riddles, sermons, prayers, lectures, and editorials. These are all marked in specific ways in contrast to casual speech. Of course, in the middle of a prayer, a casual aside would be marked too. While particular genres seem more
appropriate on certain occasions than on others, for example, sermons inserted into church services, they can be independent: we can ask someone to stop ‘sermonizing’; that is, we can recognize a genre of sermons when an instance of it, or something closely resembling an instance, occurs outside its usual setting.

What Hymes offers us in his SPEAKING formula is a very necessary reminder that talk is a complex activity, and that any particular bit of talk is actually a piece of ‘skilled work.’ It is skilled in the sense that, if it is to be successful, the speaker must reveal a sensitivity to and awareness of each of the eight factors outlined above. Speakers and listeners must also work to see that nothing goes wrong. When speaking does go wrong, as it sometimes does, that going-wrong is often clearly describable in terms of some neglect of one or more of the factors. Of course, individuals vary in their ability to manage and exploit the total array of factors; everyone in a society will not manage talk in the same way. Nonetheless, conversations can be analyzed in terms of how they fit with social norms for interaction.

**Exploration 9.2: Defining Gossip**

How can you define the communicative event of gossiping? Use Hymes’ SPEAKING categories to discuss who participates in this type of communication with whom, the characteristic linguistic features, and the social goals.

**Ethnography and beyond**

In more recent studies, the description of underlying communicative competence and actual language use are combined with critical perspectives and other forms of discourse analysis. For example, Duff (2002) looks at classroom interactions in a multiethnic Canadian high school classroom through ethnography of communication research while also adopting critical and post-structuralist theoretical stances in her analysis. She describes her work as follows:

This study employed EC [ethnography of communication] to consider how students’ identities and interpersonal differences are created and manifested through interaction patterns during classroom discussions. Unlike many past EC studies, I did not provide an indepth structural analysis of the boundaries of the activities (beginning, middle and end) or explicit instruction provided by the teacher about how to participate in different phases of one activity, or explicit sanctions for non-compliance. Nor does the analysis focus on just one type of linguistic structure or framing device. Rather, I combined content and interaction analyses of turn-taking in discussions as parallel manifestations of how knowledge, identities, and differences are established and maintained by members of a classroom ‘community.’ (Duff 2002, 315)