

**Fundamental Concepts in Sociolinguistics**  
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**Lecture 14**  
**Speech Community**

Welcome to class. Today we are going to talk about a very important phenomenon in sociolinguistics called the speech community. Though this term is self-explanatory, we will do a quick survey of the development of the notion of this term speech community, and today after much debate, what we understand by this.

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The slide is titled "Speech Community" and features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner. It contains a list of six bullet points explaining the concept of speech communities. In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark polo shirt, speaking and gesturing with his hands.

- Speech communities are groups that share values and attitudes about language use, varieties and practices.
- These communities develop through prolonged interaction among those who operate within these shared and recognized beliefs and value systems regarding forms and styles of communication.
- While we are born with the ability to learn language, we do so within some cultural and social frameworks.
- Revolution in technology, mass migration and resettlement, and the process of Globalization has changed societies.
- Such changes have bearing on our understanding of the sociolinguistic phenomenon called Speech Community as well.

Now as we have been discussing, in sociolinguistics, language is a very vigorous marker of our identity. It encodes our cultural history, shared narratives, our prides and common history. And language is very instrumental in encoding and preserving all such things. Now the idea called a speech community also has its basis in this understanding of a shared history, a shared norm, a shared practice, and a shared understanding.


Speech communities are groups that share values and attitudes about language use, varieties, and practices that these communities developed through prolonged interaction among those who

operate within the shared and recognised beliefs and value system regarding forms and styles of communication.

So this is built or created on the basis of shared language, shared understanding, shared values, shared attitude. So everything is shared and common. Because while we are born with innate ability to acquire any language. We do so in a cultural or societal framework.


But today, the revolution of technology, globalisation process, migration movement, and boom in IT technology digitization process, this whole idea of community has changed. So we are into a virtual world and we have no idea where this real world ends and the virtual world begins. It is such a fine blend. So this is very important that in such a scenario and context, we relocate or we reevaluate our understanding of community. And particularly, the speech community. So today, we are going to do a quick survey of understanding continued and sustained debate. And today, what we understand by these terms in sociolinguistics, and particularly the speech community, is what we are going to focus on in this lecture.

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### Leonard Bloomfield

- "A group of people who use the same set of speech signals is a speech-community" (Leonard Bloomfield, 1933: 29).
- This definition reflects a common belief of the time, that monolingualism – one language, one nation-state – is the canonical example of speech community.

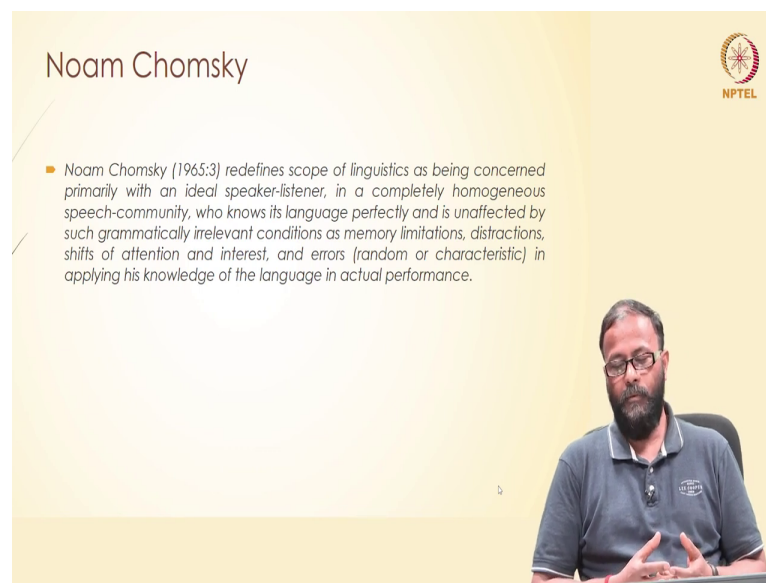


Now if you go by the old and one of the most articulated definitions or formulations of the speech community, we come across the idea by Leonard Bloomfield. So Leonard Bloomfield explains that a group of people who use the same set of speech signals as a speech community. It is a simple definition which primarily rests on the idea of one language and one community.

So it particularly focuses on the idea of monolingualism with an assumption that all members of society speak the same variety, same language. And this is what is understood as speech community and it was severely criticised later on and alters with this is the starting point. So we take it as a starting point for our discussion where Bloomfield emphasises on one language and one community, where the question is whether it can be accepted.

If you go by this, then we can see, there are many communities and very large population, which speaks, for example, English as a language and they are all apart miles away from each other, there is no geographical contiguity, they are not in contact, and can we say that English forms a single speech community because people live with the same language? So this definition runs into a problem when this is our starting point of the debate and discussion.

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The slide features a yellow background. At the top left, the name 'Noam Chomsky' is written in a dark font. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a star-like pattern and the text 'NPTEL' below it. A bullet point is located in the middle-left area, containing a quote from Chomsky (1965:3) about the ideal speaker-listener. In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark polo shirt, speaking and gesturing with his hands.

Noam Chomsky

- Noam Chomsky (1965:3) redefines scope of linguistics as being concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

But Bloomfield's idea was questioned and criticised by Chomsky. In the sense that Chomsky altered the entire understanding of language as social reality and he talked about internalised language. So he talked about innate properties of language, he talked about the human capacity to acquire and know his language, he talked about the role of primary linguistic data in acquisition of language to be so limited.

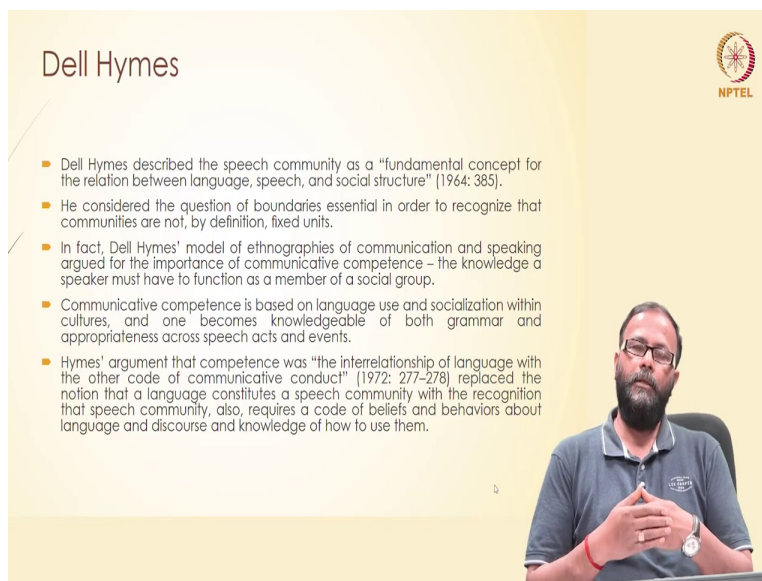
So he redefined the scope of linguistics as being concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener. So he is talking about a homogeneous set up or a group where all the speakers

of the language share the same competence as far as linguistic competence is concerned. So this is another challenge to sustain this Bloomfieldian idea with this perspective.

And he says that the scope of linguistics has been concerned primarily with an ideal speaker listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows his language perfectly and unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as a memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest and errors in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

So he is primarily referring to competence, acquisition, and linguistic competence where he imagines a homogeneous speaker listener, group or imagines a homogeneous speech community where the underlying rules of the language are known to all the speakers of the language. And he is not emphasising on the real use of it, we call it performance. So this is how he restricts the language in that sense being a social reality as advocated by other sociolinguists and people like Bloomfield.

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The slide features a title 'Dell Hymes' in the top left, an NPTEL logo in the top right, and a list of five bullet points. A video inset in the bottom right shows a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue polo shirt, speaking with his hands clasped.

### Dell Hymes

- Dell Hymes described the speech community as a "fundamental concept for the relation between language, speech, and social structure" (1964: 385).
- He considered the question of boundaries essential in order to recognize that communities are not, by definition, fixed units.
- In fact, Dell Hymes' model of ethnographies of communication and speaking argued for the importance of communicative competence – the knowledge a speaker must have to function as a member of a social group.
- Communicative competence is based on language use and socialization within cultures, and one becomes knowledgeable of both grammar and appropriateness across speech acts and events.
- Hymes' argument that competence was "the interrelationship of language with the other code of communicative conduct" (1972: 277-278) replaced the notion that a language constitutes a speech community with the recognition that speech community, also, requires a code of beliefs and behaviors about language and discourse and knowledge of how to use them.

Then we see a very important intervention by Dell Hymes in this debate. Dell Hymes describes the speech community as a fundamental concept for the relation between language speech and social structure. So he is referring to competence, which is communicative competence, where the user of the language understands social and cultural appropriateness. So he considers the

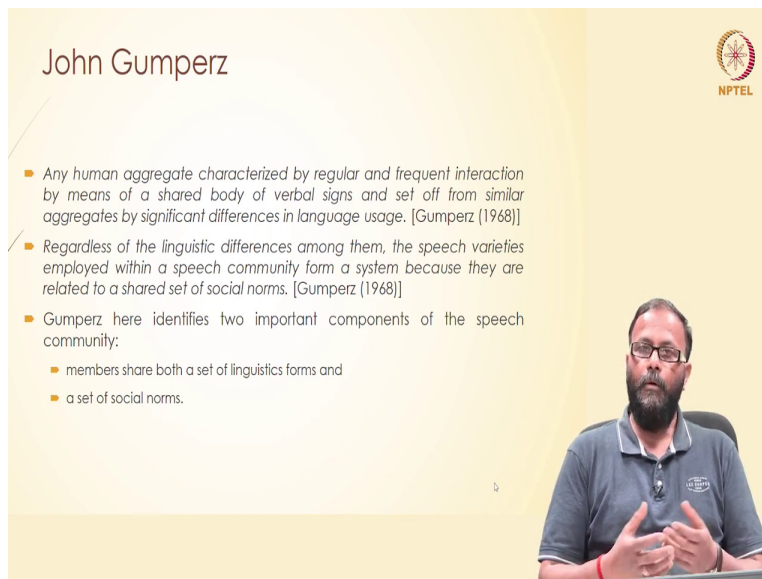
question of boundaries essential in order to recognise that communities are not by definition fixed units.

So he is taking into account the heterogeneity of the society, of the setup, or the context in which language is being used. So he is talking about the heterogeneity in performance; communicative competence is what he calls it. So in fact Dell Hymes' model of ethnographies of communication and speaking argued for the importance of communicative competence, the knowledge a speaker must have to function as a member of a social group.

So Hymes' argument that competence was interrelationship of language with the other code of communicative conduct replace the notion that language constitutes a speech community with the recognition that a speech community also requires a code of beliefs and behaviours about language and discourse, and knowledge of how to use them when taking into account the appropriateness, social appropriateness and cultural appropriateness.

So the knowledge of the structures, in terms of how they are to be used appropriately in a particular social context, in a particular cultural context. And this appropriateness, knowledge of appropriateness of use constitutes a shared social norm and allows people to be members of it by abiding by such norms by following such norms. So the Bloomfieldian idea of one language, one community gets redefined with Dell Hymes introduction into the debate.

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John Gumperz

NPTEL

- Any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage. [Gumperz (1968)]
- Regardless of the linguistic differences among them, the speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms. [Gumperz (1968)]
- Gumperz here identifies two important components of the speech community:
  - members share both a set of linguistic forms and
  - a set of social norms.


The slide features a video inset in the bottom right corner showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue polo shirt, speaking and gesturing with his hands. The background of the slide is a light yellow color.

Then a very important significant contribution is made by John Gumperz, an anthropologist and sociolinguist. And Gumperz revived the debate on the speech community by making it more democratic, accommodating, and flexible. Gumperz says “any human aggregate characterised by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage.”

He is not talking about one language. He is not talking about homogeneity. So he is incorporating heterogeneity and he is talking about the total human aggregate of the verbal signals, that means, the communicative aspect of it. When he talks about a set of linguistic forms which are shared by all the members of the group, it also corresponds to the shared accepted social norms.


So regardless of linguistic differences, among them, these speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms. So he incorporates the heterogeneity in varieties. So he is not insisting on the same variety and one language, we need to keep in mind.

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### William Labov

- The perspective put forward by William Labov can be seen as a hybrid of the Chomskyan structural homogeneity and Gumperz' focus on shared norms informing variable practices.
- *The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms: these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage. [Labov (1972:120-1)]*



Then Labov incorporated the Chomskyan idea of homogeneity in terms of listener and speaker in the event of communication and Gumperz's idea of heterogeneity. So Labov very beautifully balances both Gumperz's perspective and Chomskyan perspective and puts forward what can be seen as a hybrid of Chomskyan structural homogeneity and Gumperz focus on shared norms informing variable practices.

Labov says “the speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements so much as by participation in a set of shared norms, these norms may be observed in over types of evaluated behaviour and by informally of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of use.”

So you can see it in a very subtle way. He is talking about John Gumperz’s perspective in the first part of the statement. And in the second part of the statement he says that the norms may be observed in over types of evaluated behaviour and by uniformity of absolute patterns. He is talking about the uniformity hinted at by Chomsky at the same time. He is also talking about, you know, Gumperz’s heterogeneity and differences in quotes.

However, uniformity of maintaining the social norms in practising language. So Labov beautifully combines both these ideas. It also suited him in case because he was doing research in New York City, a very Metropolitan setup with a multilingual setup, that suited his purpose. Therefore he is very famous for his flow survey in New York City or maybe his studies in Martha Vineyard Island. So this perspective suited him and he beautifully combines Chomskyan perspective with John Gumperz’s perspective and this is how he defines the speech community.

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### Speech Community as a Fluid Community of Practice

- Speech communities may be de-localized and unbounded rather than local, and they often comprise different sub-communities with differing speech norms.
- With the recognition of the fact that speakers actively use language to construct and manipulate social identities by signalling membership in particular speech communities, we no longer consider speech community with homogeneous speech norms



So many scholars and researchers have tried to contribute to this debate, and so far what we deduct out of it and how we understand the speech community, we can summarise in the following terms. It is seen as a fluid community of practice. So now the speech community is not

seen as language specific where boundaries are limited. Linguistic boundaries are limited, but we are talking about shared norms of understanding of the language and shared norms of social practices.

So it is seen as a fluid community of practice. So we do not have a definite geographical area to define the speech community at the same time. We do not have a language specific perspective to define a speech community. So how do we see that? So speech communities may be delocalised and unbounded rather than local, and they often comprise different sub communities with differing speech norms.


So you may find little varieties and variations in the usage of language, but there are certain commonly negotiated, accepted norms of use, which forms a strong bond with the recognition of the fact that a speaker actively uses language to construct and manipulate social identities by signalling membership in particular speech communities. We no longer consider the speech community with homogeneous speech norms.

So we are accommodating these variations in language variations and we are no longer considering the speech community. In just one language, one community thing, which has a particular limited geographical boundary, we are accommodating. And that is why it is called a fluid community of practice where we have variations.


But the important point is that the norms of use appropriateness, social appropriateness, cultural appropriateness, norms of use, they are all shared and agreed upon. So all the members of that particular defined designated speech community will share the same norms of use. The varieties may vary, but norms are shared and negotiated in order to remain in the group. So that is what constitutes a speech community.



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- As a result of the continued debate on the notion of speech community in sociolinguistics, we understand that a speech community includes not only languages and language boundaries, but also **values, attitudes and ideologies** about language.
- Thus, while the concept of the speech community initially focused on language systems, relationships and boundaries, it expanded to include the notion of **social representation** and **norms** in the form of **attitudes, values, beliefs and practices** – and the notion that members of speech communities work their languages as social and cultural products.




So as a result of continuous debate on the notion of speech community in sociolinguistics, we understand that speech community includes not only language and language boundaries, but also the values, attitudes and ideologies about language. You can find this case study by Labov on Martha Vineyard Island. That is a wonderful example of a speech community.

Thus, while the concept of the speech community initially focused on language systems, relationships and boundaries, it expanded to include now the notion of social representation and norms, attitudes, values, beliefs and practices. So on the basis of this shared understanding, we understand or constitute a speech community where we have common attitudes towards the language, common values assigned towards the language. We have common beliefs and practices the way we practice in our everyday transactions, this is what makes a speech community fluid and vibrant.

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- Now we understand a speech community as a fluid community of practice. A speech community comes to share a specific set of norms for language use through living and interacting together.
- A Speech communities may therefore emerge among all groups that interact frequently and share certain norms and ideologies.
- Speech communities may share both particular sets of vocabulary and grammatical conventions, as well as speech styles and genres, and also norms for how and when to speak in particular ways.



So now we understand the speech community as a fluid community of practice. So it is no more language centric and it is no more delimited in terms of language boundaries that we have to keep in mind. So the speech community comes to share a specific set of norms for language use through living and interacting together. Variations are allowed and variations are possible, and it becomes visible in multilingual societies where we have more than one language.

But there are certain norms shared and certain cultural norms, certain social norms particularly keeping language at the centre that negotiated and practised together so they constitute one speech community. Speech communities may therefore emerge among all groups that interact frequently and share certain norms and ideologies.

Speech communities may share both particular sets of vocabulary and grammatical conventions as well as speech styles and genre, and also norms for how and when to speak in a particular way. So it is more of the use of these linguistic codes in a common shared, negotiated pattern. This is what becomes the basis of a speech community.

So I hope now we can understand, and things are clear to you. We will continue our debate again, and this is it for now about the speech community. That it is no more a language centric concept, which goes by the language boundaries, but it is more of a shared understanding of language, notions of shared norms, practices. So it is more fluid and democratic and flexible today. And it

is all about the values, attitudes, and linguistic practices that we share together to form a speech community. So thank you for now. Thank you very much.