COMMUNICATION RULES
Theory and Research

Susan B. Shimanoff
Foreword by Dell Hymes

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DEDICATED TO

Perry S. Shimanoff, my husband
Walter R. Fisher, my mentor
Jerrell D. Bussey and Shirley M. Bussey, my parents

for their encouragement and support

FOREWORD

A foreword should indicate reasons for reading the book it introduces. The main reason, of course, shoud be what the book has to say, but Dr. Shimanoff sets forth her subject so well as to make any additional description redundant. Let me try, therefore, to indicate the interest of the book by adding to its context. I shall try to place the book against the background of some general trends in fields concerned with communication and explore its implications for linguistics and ethnography. These last are fields with which I am especially familiar, but they are relevant beyond that fact. A communication theory must account for language, and the term "rule" has an established place in linguistic research and fields influenced by linguistics; moreover, the use of rule in linguistics conforms essentially to the use defined by Dr. Shimanoff. The case of linguistics may strengthen the case for rules research yet require mutual questioning and clarification. In Dr. Shimanoff's analysis, rules are necessarily concerned with behavior, and rule-governed, or rule-guided, behavior is central to ethnography. Indeed, rules research, as formulated here, is partly a kind of ethnography. Development of the link with comparative ethnography should contribute both to the content of rules research and to refinement of its theoretical models.

I

Human communication theory can hardly help considering itself a perspective on all of human life. Its institutional roots may be particular and diverse: schools of communication, departments of speech and rhetoric, centers of primate studies, parts of social psychology, psychiatry, linguistics, anthropology, sociology. Yet the notion of "communication" implies a claim of universal relevance.

What can be the future of such a theory and such a claim? The rise of the graduate school and university in the last century

witnessed a dispersion of knowledge of human life among disciplines, each with some claim to a perspective. Economists may sometimes suspect that the rationality of choice among alternate means to certain ends is a general paradigm for human action. Sociologists must often consider that the origins, maintenance, and transformation of social order is basic to all human experience—societal or personal. Anthropologists know no community without cultural behavior, and avant-garde folklorists none without some sphere in which interaction takes forms shaped by traditional aesthetic values. Theology, according to Tillich, knows no person or people without ultimate concerns, without "god-terms." Amidst so many jostling disciplines, a semblance of harmony seems due to the fact that each, after all, has a certain favored preserve of data and a certain methodology. Whatever may be the ultimate interests of humanity, in unity and free sharing of knowledge, the interests of scholars seeking a place in the academic sun seem to require some claim of uniqueness and monopoly. And as the world becomes more and more one, methodology seems more and more the key.

That conclusion is suggested by the circumstances of anthropology and folklore, two disciplines whose initial niche was protected most by separate subject matter. Although literally the unqualified "study of man," anthropology accepted a division of labor specializing in peoples and cultures separate from its own civilization. Folklore and folklife somewhat similarly specialized in what was preserved or passing away from earlier stages and at the peripheries of that civilization. With the end of explicit colonial relations in most of the world, the usual subjects of anthropological study have become increasingly resistant to research by foreigners except on their own terms. Anthropologists, indeed, may remind them of an unmodern past they wish to put behind them; economists, political scientists, and sociologists may be more welcome. As American anthropology attempts to domesticate itself and find a role in study of the United States, questions of method come to the fore. There is clearly no question of a monopoly on news simply through dint of having been to an exotic place. A role for anthropology has to be argued using the virtues of ethnography as a method of work in competition with others. It is not too much to say that classical

anthropology will go the way of classical studies, becoming the counterpart for other vanished cultures of scholarship about Greece and Rome, if it does not succeed in establishing the scientific and social claims of ethnography as a method, distinct from experiment and survey on the one hand, and journalism on the other. Folklorists are divided between those who want to remain devoted to what is past, or passing, and those who see in the aesthetic dimension of small-group interaction—and tradition*alizing* as a dynamic process—universal claims on a part of the future. For the latter group, new methodology has become a focal concern.

This book is an attempt to provide a methodological center for human communication theory in terms of the notion of rule. Such an attempt must be seen as a challenge to major methodological trends already in place, one quantitative, one qualitative.

Much that bears the name "communications research" is cast in a quantitative mode—survey results, content analysis, and the like. That mode goes back to the impetus that led to the institutionalization of the social sciences. When the Social Science Research Council was founded a little more than fifty years ago (Sibley, 1974), one might have seen the dominant trend in the disciplines devoted to systematic study of human life to be quantitative research, research seeking to adapt a methodology associated with the natural sciences. Partly the trend was emulation of sciences more prestigious and successful, but partly it was dedication to the possibility of improving the human prospect through exact knowledge. The growth of departments and divisions of social science in universities, the requirements of industries and government agencies, the availability of certain kinds of data, and, to be sure, the continuing discovery of worthwhile applications, have made such work a permanent part of modern society and intellectual life. When we wish to assess the effects of segregation, or of college education, or to bring the processes of ongoing linguistic change within the sphere of the known, we find ourselves relying on quantitative work.

Since the Second World War, however, there has been a surge and revitalization of qualitative research. The study of one aspect of communication, language, has been at the heart of that revitalization. As a departmental discipline, indeed, linguistics is

a creature of the second half of the century. Its success in finding a niche has been based on its discovery of a methodological principle that has enabled it to make the structure of language a general subject of study. Most people have had opinions about language, and many disciplines have dealt with it, but its internal workings, its nature as a system of covariation between form and meaning, did not give rise to a departmental discipline until within the memory of some still alive. Alongside specialization in certain languages and language families (French, Romance languages, Indo-European, Chinese), and in their particular systems of sounds, words, and sentences, there came to exist specialization in sound systems (phonology) in general, the make-up of words (morphology) in general, the make-up of sentences (syntax) in general. And it was generalization not based on illusion, not based, that is, on mistakenly taking the characteristics of familiar languages as the nature of language as such. On the one hand, anthropological linguists such as Franz Goas had worked to purge theoretical conceptions of language of such ethnocentrism. On the other hand, a general methodology was developed that answered to the units and relations of any language. The heart of the method was the question, not of quantity, more or less, but of quality, "same or different." Amidst the infinite heterogeneity of actual utterances, certain relations were constant. Behind the variability of speech lay an invariant system that could be demonstrated and described.

The general principles have evolved and changed in the development of modern linguistics, but their history has throughout had the character of being at once qualitative and rigorous. That has been the source of the attraction to others seeking an alternative to quantitative methodology as a model for the human sciences. The impact was felt first in phonology, the analysis of sounds, because phonology was the great novelty of the new linguistics. Speech sounds had been descriptively measured in the laboratory, identified in the field, and transcribed with more or less adequacy, but only in the 1920s and 1930s did they become the basis of a general science. The key was recognizing that the foundation of a general science of phonology was not measurement, but the intersubjective agreement of speakers of a language. Speakers were not usually aware of their system of sounds as such

but were necessarily aware of the qualitative, "same or different," distinctions on which it was based. From these distinctions, the linguist could infer a structure of relations.

A limited example must serve. Perhaps every speech community pronounces some words with a puff of breath after a consonant at the beginning of a word—let us say, a consonant such as "p." In some languages, such as Hindi, the presence or absence of such a puff of breath (called "aspiration" by linguists) indicates the difference between one word and another. In English it does not. A "pig" with little breath and a "pig" with a lot are the same, so far as using the word "pig" is concerned. (A "pig" with a lot of breath, of course, may indicate that the speaker is trying to be especially clear, or amplify an attitude.) Conversely, there are many languages in which the vowel sound of "pig" is not distinct from the vowel sound of "peg," as far as the word one is using is concerned. (The Indian languages of Oregon and Washington are mostly of this type.) In English, on the other hand, "The Three Little Pegs" is not the name of a traditional story, and "Take him down a pig" is not one way of saying a conventional expression.

The principle of covariation between form and meaning employed here is general. Languages differ in the forms that count as differences of meaning. In English, the aspirated and unaspirated "p" count as one unit, from the standpoint of the dictionary, but in Hindi as two. In many Indian languages of Oregon and Washington the vowels of "pig" and "peg" count as one unit, from the standpoint of the dictionary, but in standard English as two. The valid specifics are arrived at by a method of contrast within a frame that is general. That is, the two kinds of "p" are said to contrast in Hindi, but not in English (from the standpoint of the dictionary—from the standpoint of expressive devices, a separate though interdependent system, there is a complementary contrast in English, the aspiration expressing emphasis, either of form [clarity] or meaning [attitude]). The contrast is relative to a specific frame—which sounds contrast with each other may vary with position in word or sentence. The units that contrast are themselves complex, intersections of several dimensions of contrast. Thus an unaspirated and an aspirated "p" are alike in being stops (stoppage of the outgoing breath), voiceless (no vibra-

of the vocal chords), and labial (made with the lips). An English
"p" contrasts with an English "f" in that the latter is not a stop
(some air escapes), an English "b" in that the latter is not voiceless
(the vocal chords vibrate), and an English "t" in that the latter is
not made with the lips; and "fig," "big," and (tig-[lic aced]) con-
trast in English as words, having separate places in the dictionary.

From relations such as these, a model can be derived that one
can attempt to apply beyond language. One can seek sets of units
that contrast with each other, on a finite number of dimensions,
within a certain frame. Given units and structures established
in such a way, one can develop models of the more complex
relations into which they enter.

The story of the influence of such models cannot be told here,
but suffice it to say that the influence has played an important
part in anthropology in the United States, has affected ethno-
methodology as a movement within sociology, and has entered
into the rise of "structuralism" and "semiotics" as general intel-
lectual movements. The common focus of these movements is a
concern, first, with the existence of codes underlying messages
(structures underlying behavior), and then with the general
nature and kinds of codes. In a sense, it is under the rubric of
"codes and messages" (or, "codes and modes [of realizing them])"
that structuralism and semiotics have laid claim to being central
to an understanding of human life in terms of communication.
Early on, indeed, the notion of "communication" had been ad-
vanced by those influenced by linguistics as model or stimulus—
in anthropology (Hall and Trager, 1953; Trager and Hall, 1954;
Gumperz and Hymes, 1964; Hymes, 1967), in sociology (Dreitzel,
1970), and in folklore (Ben-Amos and Goldstein, 1957: 6; Paredes
and Bauman, 1972).

Rules research, then, does not have the advantage that pho-
nology had. It does not enter an intellectual scene wherein it is the
first to propose a general methodology for the communicative
phenomena with which it deals. If it has advantages, these must lie
in other directions. One may be associated with streams of
philosophy long indigenous to Anglo-American thought, those of
utilitarianism, empiricism, analysis (Shwayder, 1965: 233ff). A
second may be a focus on verifiable and vulnerable theories re-
lating to specific behavior. Much of the impulse of structuralism

and semiotics seems to go in the direction of texts, cultural or literary, and into debate about terms and allegiances. A third may be the possibility of integration with linguistics directly. Rather than acknowledge linguistics by analogy, rules research may be able to capitalize on the great body of linguistic work of recent years. For this to happen, however, certain issues must be addressed.

II

The term "rule" has become a normal idiom in linguistics in the last generation, due especially to the work of Noam Chomsky. Chomsky's impact, however, has had to do with his conceptions of the aim and form of a theory of grammar. When he wrote (1961) of the need to consider seriously the notion "grammatical rule," he did not deal on the term "rule" itself but on the need for a theory of grammar to have rules of certain kinds, accomplishing certain purposes. Rule was taken for granted as traditional in grammar (and perhaps in logic and mathematics). In seeking a precise formulation of the notion "grammatical rule," Chomsky's focus was on "grammatical." He inspired many to engage in "rules research" of a kind, but his followers did not debate the use of rule in relation to other generalizing terms within its semantic field. Rather, they debated the merits of one rule, or kind of rule, as against another. They did not ask, "Should grammatical transformations be called rules?" but whether or not they should have this or that property.

There has been some critical discussion of the linguistic use of rule, but it has become as common a term in linguistics as "sentence" and "word." And if we consider the decision tree for inferring rules presented by Shimanoff (Chapter 3), we find that the three steps to writing an hypothesized rule are quite compatible with linguistic inquiry. To be sure, some linguists rely on reflection for examples, but that can perhaps be considered one way to observe behavior (their own).

Let us consider the three steps (contextual, controllable, and criticizable) in turn.

(1) If a phenomenon of language was not "contextual" in Shimanoff's sense, that is, recurrent, it would not be considered

an object of analysis. The very purpose of a grammar is to describe the finite system that underlies the infinite variety of often unique utterances.

(2) If a recurrent phenomenon is not controllable, then its description would be made part of something other than the rules of the particular grammar. Here, to be sure, linguists distinguish levels of absence of control. On the one hand, it is the hope of Chomsky and many others to determine relations over which speakers have no control, because such features are innate, built into the speaker and the language, as it were. Such relations would be assigned to the general theory of language and would not need to be specified for individual languages. On the other hand, some relations are not controllable within a particular language. For example, most languages have nasal stops, such as "m" and "n," and when they do, the nasals are voiced (the vocal chords vibrate to produce an audible buzz). Some languages, however, have nasal stops that are voiceless as regular parts of their phonology. Clearly, then, human beings can either voice or not voice a nasal stop. Within a particular language, however, the voicing may be invariant, automatic. In such a case, linguists usually relegate the automatic feature to a sphere of what is given with the elements on which rules operate. The feature is not itself an object of rules.

The "basicness" of controllability is revealingly shown in a passing comment by Chomsky and Halle (1968: 298) on labio-velar stops (stops made by coordinated closure of the lips and of the vocal cavity by placement of tongue against the back of the mouth) in some West African languages.

> Since clicklike suction is clearly an independently controllable aspect of the speech event, the data just cited establish suction as a separate phonetic feature, regardless of the fact that apparently in no language are there contrasting pairs of utterances that differ solely in this feature.

Controllability and contrast in some languages are expected to go together, but controllability itself admits a feature to the general system.

Such an exception points out the need to consider rules of language by *two* elementary functions, not just one, as has been