



A FIRST LOOK AT
COMMUNICATION THEORY

**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Gerry Philipsen,
creator of Speech Codes Theory**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wZuL1oqOPw>

GERRY PHILIPSEN

Griffin: I'm speaking with Gerry Philipsen. Gerry is a professor of communication at the University of Washington and the creator of Speech Codes Theory. I have a special relationship with Gerry because we were in grad school together. I never remember the word *ethnography* ever being mentioned when I was at Northwestern, and yet you left there and did it. Where'd you get the idea?

Philipsen: I think when I got the idea to do it was when I found myself in the midst of graduate school working down in the near-south side of Chicago in a community. And one of the main ways that I learned to do what I did was as a practical necessity, because as I lived and worked among people who had different ideas from mine, one of the things I learned was that sometimes they would say to me that I had done things wrong in their view, that I had made mistakes. And, so, as I went through the process of trying to work effectively with people who had different expectations from mine, I either had to start learning some things and learning them on the spot or be a complete failure. My current research is really going back to the Nacirema Code, which is American spelled backwards, and it's a code of life and a code of communication that places a great emphasis on the individual as unique.

Griffin: It does strike me as you talk about the Nacirema that the Nacirema are us, and by us I mean communication people, that our communication departments, at least in the interpersonal area, are filled with people who talk about self-disclosure and close personal relationships and foreground the importance of communication. Is all that typical of Nacirema?

Philipsen: I think this is very true; and I think that, if you look at most introductory books on interpersonal communication, you very likely will find a part that deals with self-disclosure, how to reveal the self. You probably won't find a chapter on promises, the nature of promising, the nature of pledges or vows, or how to keep your pledge; but I think if a "traditional Souix" were to write about communication, it would be very different. It would be how do you speak to an elder; how do you speak to a cousin; how do you speak to a parent, a sibling? And, also, there'd be a whole chapter on pledges, promises, and vows, just as in a Nacirema interpersonal book there'd be a whole chapter on how to disclose yourself.

Griffin: I've written one.

[laughter]

Griffin: For many years, your work was referred to ethnography of communication; and then you came out with a piece, what, three years ago or four years ago, and you talked about *speech codes*. Is that the same thing; are those synonyms?

Philipsen: I would say ethnography is the study of a particular culture and the writing down of the report that you are making from several ethnographies – some that I've conducted and some that my students have conducted, and some that have been written by others. I've tried to draw some conclusions about how communication works and the role communication plays in it; and, so, at that point I was making a statement of a communication theory that was grounded in the ethnographies of many societies.

Griffin: So ethnography is a methodology, and speech codes is a theory that is grounded in what you learn from various ethnographies.

Philipsen: Exactly. That's right.

Griffin: Gerry, I'm particularly struck by your fifth proposition that says a code can explain, predict, even control, communication about communication. Do I have that right?

Philipsen: Yes. In Proposition Five I've tried to do something fairly delicate and a little bit subtle and say, well, you can't absolutely predict what people are going to do because they use a culture and yet there's something there, and how to formulate that. Proposition Five is my best effort to formulate that and to say when you use a culture and when you use it to criticize someone, when someone uses it to criticize you, when you use it to interpret or justify some behavior, that's when you can begin to predict or even control that if you challenge someone using a code, and they hold that code, they subscribe to it, they're going to respond to you in a certain way. And this is, I think, kind of the gist of it.

Griffin: To be an ethnographer, and not just to go through the motions but to really embrace the methodology of ethnography, do you have to be a relativist? I mean, a moral obligation in one culture becomes deviance in another culture. And if you're going to appreciate the culture, to you really have to become a cultural and ethical relativist?

Philipsen: I am here to try to understand them. I'm here to walk in their path. I'm here to try to see the world through their eyes, hear it through their ears; and to the degree that one begins to judge them, it seems to me that this then limits one's capacity to enter into an appreciation of their world.

Griffin: Can you have standards for yourself, however, where you say, "for me something is right or wrong" – be it in the speech area or other areas – rather than just saying, "and this I prefer?"

Philipsen: I think absolutely, and I think that one could be studying a way of life that one does not appreciate or find particularly attractive, and then to figure out where you would draw the line as to how far you would go in terms of adopting the code that you're trying to study. Now, it's a difficult line to draw, but I think it's an important one.

Griffin: Thank you Gerry.

Philipsen: Thank you.