

THE COMPETENCE TO PERFORM

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Resumo:

Os conceitos de competência e desempenho, conforme propostos por Chomsky em *Aspects da teoria da sintaxe*, além de seu valor teórico, são de fundamental importância na lingüística aplicada. Para tal, entretanto, devem ser reinterpretados. Considerando a competência e o desempenho de um falante-ouvinte ideal como um polo extremo de abstração, analisamos tais conceitos à luz de suas aplicações e implicações no tocante ao ensino de línguas, com vistas à sua aplicação na formulação de objetivos, gradação de material didático e avaliação da aprendizagem. Procuramos demonstrar que o conceito de competência envolve uma série de conceitos de diferentes graus de abstração, todos significativos nas aplicações consideradas. Finalmente, dedicamo-nos à consideração de um conceito revisto de competência, a fim de que nesta se possa incluir a criatividade.

Resume:

Les notions de compétence et performance, telles que Chomsky les a proposées dans *Aspects de la théorie syntaxique*, ont, au delà de leur valeur théorique, une importance considérable pour la linguistique appliquée. Mais il faut, dans cette perspective, en faire une révision. En prenant la compétence et la performance d'un locuteur-auditeur idéal en tant que un pôle extrême d'abstraction, nous examinons de telles notions à la lumière de leurs applications et implications, en ce qui concerne l'enseignement de langues, considérant ainsi leur application à la formulation des objectifs, à l'établissement d'une progression et à l'évaluation de l'apprentissage. Nous essayons de montrer alors que la notion de compétence comprend toute une série de concepts de différents degrés d'abstraction, décisifs pour les applications envisagées. Finalement, nous considérons le rôle de cette notion revue de la compétence, pour y inclure la créativité.

The fact that language systems have to be kept separate from speech for the purposes of linguistic studies was first brought to the fore by Ferdinand de Saussure's now classic *langue/parole* dichotomy, and later elaborated upon by Hjelmslev and Coseriu. More recently, this distinction was reanalyzed by Chomsky and formulated in terms of a similar dichotomy, between a speaker's *competence* and *performance*.

The framework within which these concepts have involved – that

of establishing the goals of linguistic theory and defining its domain – invests them with fundamental theoretical significance, but they are also of great importance for applied linguistics.

Their use in such applications, however, requires some rethinking. In this article, we propose to discuss some of the implications and applications of the concepts of *competence* and *performance* (as well as related concepts such as *ideal speaker*, *homogeneous speech community*, etc.) in native and foreign language teaching, with a view towards their application in the formulation of objectives, grading and student evaluation. Competence will be considered to involve a series of concepts of different degrees of abstraction, the competence of an ideal speaker – listener standing at the higher end of the scale of abstraction while the individual speaker's performance lies at the other end. (Standart set theory notation and Venn diagrams will occasionally be used to summarize or clarify the concepts discussed).

The concepts to be discussed here were thus defined by Chomsky in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*:

DEF. 1 Linguistic theory is 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. (p.3)

DEF. 2 We thus make a fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and

DEF 3 *performance* (the actual use of language in concrete situations). Only in the idealization set forth in the preceding paragraph is performance a direct reflection of competence. (p.4)

Let us now analyse in detail each of these formulations.

2. The concept of an ideal speaker-hearer's competence is obviously an abstract one. Furthermore, the expression "completely homogeneous speech-community" needs refining -- in what respects is this community completely homogeneous? We could assume this statement to refer to speech homogeneity alone (as it apparently does), but one can hardly imagine any community in which speech is not related to and dependent upon extralinguistic factors.

If we assume that in DEF. 1 the community is homogeneous in *all* respects, or that extralinguistic factors are not being taken into consideration (1), it appears to follow that the performance (\mathcal{P}) of our ideal speaker-hearer will not differ from his competence (\mathcal{C}), i.e. all of competence will be reflected in his performance:

$$(1) \quad \mathcal{P} = \mathcal{C}$$

Still, even in an homogeneous community, such a condition can hardly be admitted to obtain. Chomsky himself calls his readers' attention to this:

Only under the idealization set forth in the preceding paragraph is performance a direct reflection of competence. In actual fact, it obviously could not directly reflect competence. (p. 4)

It would be more logical (and more realistic, even when referring to an *ideal* speaker) to consider that only *some* of the speaker's competence is reflected in his performance:

$$(2) \quad \mathcal{P} \subset \mathcal{C}$$

This, apparently, is Chomsky's point as well. However, the above quotation continues by stating:

A record of natural speech will show numerous false starts, deviations from rules, changes of plan in mid-course, and so on. (p. 4)

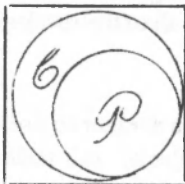
which leads us to see performance as some kind of defective or incomplete application of competence.

But, even a "completely homogeneous speech-community", speech events will somehow be related to extralinguistic (situational, social, etc.) elements, so that some of the factors determining the performance of our ideal spaker will be of nonlinguistic nature.

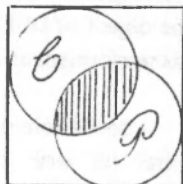
The difference between (1), (2), and this last situation (3) can be adequately represented by the following Venn diagrams:



$$(1) \quad \mathcal{P} = \mathcal{C}$$



$$(2) \quad \mathcal{P} \subset \mathcal{C}$$



$$(3) \quad \mathcal{P} \neq \mathcal{C} \\ \mathcal{P} \cap \mathcal{C} \neq \mathcal{P}$$

Before taking other factors into consideration, let us analyse a *real* speaker-hearer's competence and performance.

3. For a real speaker-hearer, the competence (C_R) will obviously be less than of an ideal speaker:

$$(4) C_R \subset C$$

His performance (P_R) will also reflect *part* of his competence (since it is dependent upon more than purely linguistic competence), but it will obviously not equal the ideal speaker's performance (P). The real speaker's performance will be determined by several factors:

His competence (C_R) is limited in various respects:

- temporally (age and generation variants);
- socially (environment, educational background);
- culturally (educational background, profession, interests);
- spatially (geographic variation)

Such aspects of linguistic competence were among the first to interest sociolinguists (cf. Bright's "Dimensions of Sociolinguistics"). How much a speaker knows concerning other manifestations of his language will depend on a number of factors including education, personal interests and even accidental exposure to such variants. Students of language, linguistics and literature are not the only ones to take special interest in different aspects of language: lawyers and advertising men, among others, clearly realize the relevance of language for their activity.

Since competence is defined as strictly linguistic, and the specification of an ideal, homogeneous community aims at excluding the consideration of nonlinguistic factors (2) (linguistic rather than communicative competence is the object of DEF. 1), not all of the speaker's competence will be reflected in his performance:

- social role may lead a speaker to use one set of forms while avoiding another (as with caste dialects, and male/female speech, for instance);
- effective communication requires that the speaker adapt his message to his listener's capabilities (vocabulary, subject and register choice);
- topic limitations;

- knowledge of and experience in subject matter;
- social desirability of speaking (phatic communion x socially expected silence) and/or dealing with specific subjects (e.g. taboo words or subjects);
- memory limitations;
- psychological factors (distraction, change of attention or interest, individual likes and dislikes, etc.).

The above mentioned aspects of language use have been considered by sociologists, sociolinguists, communication theorists, anthropologists, ethnolinguists, psychologists, and – more recently – by discourse analysts. The integrated outcome of such research may eventually provide us with a better idea of how linguistic competence is related to and manifested in communicative competence.

If nothing but effective communication were required, (3) linguistic competence would rank quite low, since much effective communication involves truncated utterances and even isolated words (as in road and traffic signs and most informal speech): dead end; no smoking; exit; on/off; “Got it?”, “No”. “Damn!”

Doubtless many other factors could be thought of, and since these will vary from one person to another, individual competence and performance will of necessity differ:

$$(5) C_{R_i} \neq C_{R_j} \neq C_{R_k} \dots \neq C_{R_n}$$

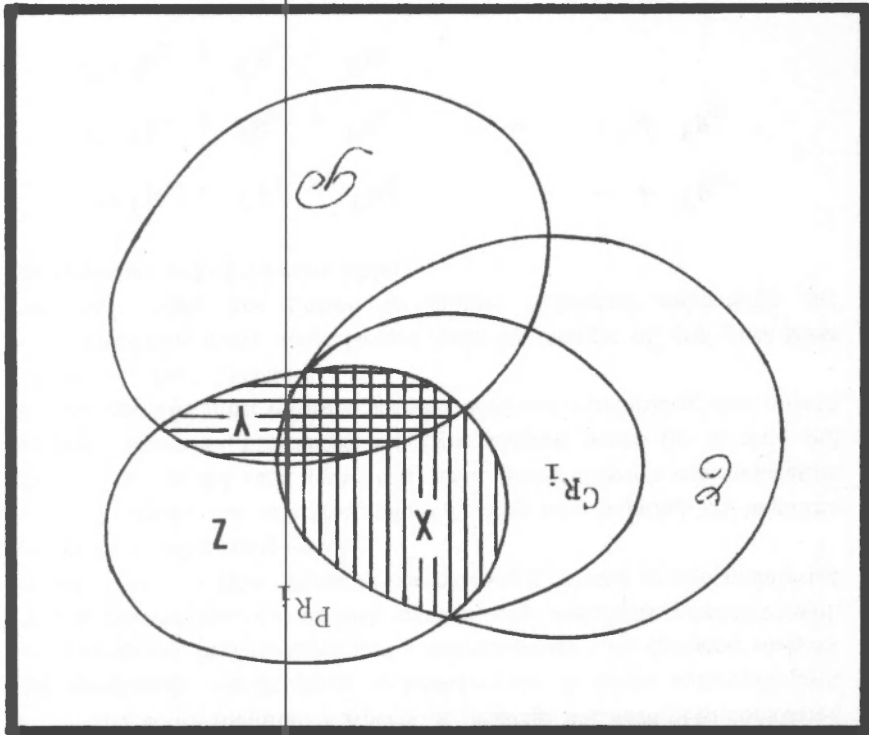
$$(6) P_{R_i} \neq P_{R_j} \neq P_{R_k} \dots \neq P_{R_n}$$

$$(7) P_{R_i} \neq C_{R_i} \cap C_R$$

Also, any real speaker's performance (P_R) may (and most probably will include characteristics not to be found in the ideal speaker's performance (\mathcal{P}) – “errors, random or characteristic”. Thus, P_{R_i} is seen to be divisible into three different subsets:

$$(8) X = \{P_{R_i} \cap C_{R_i}\}$$

$$Y = \{P_{R_i} \cap \mathcal{P}\}$$



$$Z = \{PR_1 - (X \cup Y)\}$$

Thus, C_R and P_R are still abstract (even though less so than \mathcal{C} and \mathcal{C}), and individual competence and performance (P_{R_i} , C_{R_i}) are the least abstract entities to be dealt with (especially P_{R_i} — one individual's concrete manifestation).

Even so, P_{R_i} is only easy to delimit for a given period of time, although it may be theoretically possible to record the whole of one individual's acts of speech. The boundaries of C_{R_i} are of necessity hazy: how much has been lost? How much is being assimilated, thought not yet retrievable?

If the concepts of competence and performance are to be applied in any but strictly theoretical considerations, they can not be taken as stated (their highest level of abstraction) but, rather, somewhere along the scale of decreasing abstraction, so as to reflect naturally prevailing conditions.

4. *Competence and performance in language teaching*

In language teaching, it is C_T and P_R one is usually concerned with, although in specific cases one may also consider some kind of "group competence" somewhere in between C_R and \mathcal{C} . Group competence and performance will be the intersection of all individual competences and performances:

$$(9) C_G = \bigcap_i C_{R_i}$$

$$(10) P_G = \bigcap_i P_{R_i}$$

When formulating educational objectives or linguistic norms, for instance, one deals with C_R and P_R (i. e., abstractions standing for a real speaker-hearer's competence and performance — still an ideal goal). When evaluating a student, one is judging his individual performance (P_{R_i}) against an expected competence/performance set characteristic of a group norm, and thus located somewhere between the real and ideal poles in a scale of abstraction.

5. *Native language teaching*

One aim of native language teaching is developing competence by presenting the student with language items and resources he is not familiar with and, whenever necessary by explaining the processes involved.

This implies both a preestablished goal (the language standard against which the student's performance will be judged) and an assumption that each individual student's competence is not up to that standard *and can be changed* (language teachers would perhaps prefer to say "improved", a word which implies a socially-based value judgment).

The language standard can *not* be the hyperidealized condition summarized in (1), above, but, rather, will tend to be an intermediate abstraction: the competence of a real speaker-hearer (C_R).

Also, competence is seen as a time dependent variable which presumably can never decrease (except in pathological cases) but, given the proper conditions, can always be increased:

$$(11) n(C_{R_i}) = f(t)$$

$$(12) C_R = \lim C_{R_i}$$

$$t \longrightarrow \infty$$

In other words, the student's performance will not only tend to be less than what it *could* be (since he is not able to fully explore the resources of his competence) but also less than what it *should* be (i.e. his competence is not up to the standard proposed).

If the relation between competence and performance is to be optimized, conditions have to be provided for the student to reveal his weaknesses as well as demonstrate his mastery of specific aspects of the language. This is where pattern drills can be useful (4) (by focusing on one important item or process) and it is also a good justification for written exercises (where the student can judge his own performance against the standard of his competence).

6. *Foreign language teaching*

In foreign language teaching one faces a completely different problem. Beginning students have practically no competence in the language to be learned, except as concerns language universals.

As it is not yet at all known what these universals actually are, it is safe to assume that only eventual similarities (usually no more than surface ones) will give the student any kind of a headstart. (5)

It is up to the teacher, then to provide the student with most (if not all) of the items that will make up his competence.

Thus, the choice of items to be presented becomes of paramount importance, since it is from these items that the student will derive the set of internalized rules which will account for his future performance.

Since in most foreign language teaching the student is hardly ever exposed to the language outside the classroom, the set of individual competences in a classroom will tend to be rather homogeneous and students performance (always judged in relation to his acquired competence) may be much closer to his actual competence than in other language teaching situations. (6)

7. It was pointed out above that competence is not fixed once and for all, but, rather, that it tends to be increased as the subject is exposed to a variety of situations.

The ideal speaker-hearer mentioned in DEF. 1 lives in what must be an ultraideal world, in which nothing linguistically new ever happens (except for permutations and combinations of already given or derived elements) and where, paradoxically enough, no true creativity exists (if he knows the language perfectly, this precludes language change, especially as concerns the kind of rule-breaking that leads to system change). (7)

Real speakers do not of course have such an ideal competence. Theirs is gradually developed according to a number of different factors (mostly the result of the interaction of psychological, social and educational ones) and has to be ready to cope with change. Whatever competence may be, it is not a closed set. Feedback from an individual's own performance as well as the observation of that of others contribute to refining competence, thus leading to reordering, reshaping or even substitution or deletion of items and rules (if one accepts this view of competence). Language teachers daily witness the action of such processes as they follow their student's development.

Moreover, at a time when great emphasis is placed on creativity, it must be remembered that true creativity can by no means be equated with the correct juggling of rules, and quite often consists in severe violation of the rule system previously taken for granted, and this can in no account be subsumed under "false starts, deviation from rules [*here implicitly considered accidental*, C.C.], changes of plan in mid-course, and so on".

Here, Koestler's remark is well we repeating and pondering upon:
... true creativity often starts where language ends. (p. 177)

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Notas:

- 1 Even if extralinguistic factors affected all members of the community equally and this is true, to a certain extent, of real communities), they would lead to differences between competence and performance, so that the condition proposed in (1) would not obtain.
- 2 For the implications of *homogeneous* in DEF. 1, see item 2, above.
- 3 And here one is reminded of Weaver's *effectiveness problem*: “it is clear that communication either affects conduct or is without any discernible or probable effect at all”. (p. 4)
- 4 Cf. for example Brown's justification of pattern practice, or Roulet's discussion of different theories and their implications for language teaching.
- 5 It could be argued that the target language may share rules with the students' language. But it must be borne in mind that rules are constructs created by the linguist and therefore may not reflect the real nature of the facts of the languages involved. Such sharing, then, may be no more than the result of fortuitous coincidence. Also since rules are formulated within a given description (and descriptive model) one ought to make sure that both languages can be adequately described by the same model (the validity of which, of course, could eventually be questioned).
- 6 There is only one source of information -- the teacher or teaching staff -- so that information is integrated or normalized, and the input is the same for all students. Due to the small number of people involved, mutual interaction and reinforcement of learning positively influence such normalization, and testing and assignments provide a guide to what the students are expected to learn.
- 7 Chomsky maintains that the system of rules that make up competence is endowed with properties -- such as recursiveness -- which account for linguistic creativity. *Productivity* or *generativity* would be better terms. The application of a number of rules enables the generation of different sequences of elements, and thus leads to *productivity*. Speakers may be *generating* mostly newly formed sentences all the time, but very few of them *create*. Most language use is far from exhausting the latent possibilities of the system, and true creativity often adds to these possibilities.