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Competence

The term *competence* is generally used to describe the knowledge underlying a native-speaker's production and interpretation of a potentially infinite number of syntactically well-formed strings in a given language. The term was first used in this sense in *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax* by Noam Chomsky who distinguished it there from performance, understood not only as the actuation of competence but also as the workings of attention, memory, and perception. Competence then is an abstraction designed to clear away a set of complex and interacting variables so as to allow the linguist an uncontaminated perspective on linguistic form. In its Chomskian usage, competence is ahistorical and asocial and at the same time the fundamental object of study for linguistics. How are society and history excised from the generative view of language? First, knowledge of language (or rather, "knowledge of grammar") is said to consist primarily, although not exclusively, of generative rules as opposed to the products of learning and memorization. This view excludes from consideration the pragmatics of language learning and acquisition (e.g. input; see SOCIALIZATION) and the social dynamics of language change. Second, this knowledge of generative rules is said to be largely unconscious. In this way speakers' indigenous understandings (metapragmatic reflections) are effectively excluded from consideration of the total linguistic fact. While nonlinguists may not share a set of descriptive formalisms with linguists, they nevertheless exhibit varying degrees of language awareness (in some cases this may be bound up with occupation). Field linguists often encounter certain individuals who, though completely untrained in current generative theories of grammar, nevertheless are able to discuss language in terms of its structural principles with extraordinary acuity. "Linguistics" it would seem is an indigenous tradition in every community. The claim that knowledge of language is largely unconscious (except in the case of academic linguists) may thus strike many anthropologists as particularly ethnocentric and Victorian. Third, understood largely as a reflection of

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universal grammatical principles and language-specific parameter settings, competence, fits neatly within the Chomskian vision of the "completely homogeneous speech community," with both sociolinguistic and cross-linguistic variation traditionally given second-billing to the discovery and description of formal linguistic universals. In each case, the conception of competence implicitly precludes an understanding of the embedding of language in the social world, history, and structured activities of its users. One may well ask whether the notion of competence remains relevant to a socially informed linguistics.

It should be noted that both linguists and linguistic anthropologists concerned with language use recognize that knowledge of language is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the production and interpretation of many (if not all) utterances. Consider in this respect an utterance such as *I live here.* The proper interpretation of such an utterance will depend not only on the recipient's knowledge of English grammar, allowing assignment of appropriate grammatical functions to individual lexical items, but also on the hearers' knowledge of the fact that the verb *live* can be used to mean 'inhabit.' Further removed from the linguistic domain are the kinds of knowledge that allow for the proper interpretation of *here.* How is a referent assigned to this deictic when it could conceivably refer to 'at the desk,' 'in this room,' 'in this house,' 'in this city,' 'in this country' ad infinitum. Clearly the predicate *(live)* suggests that *here* refers to a definable space in which human(s) might reside. So in making sense of this utterance speakers draw on their knowledge of the kinds of spaces humans typically inhabit. The example illustrates that the interpretation of any specific use of language in fact demands that hearers draw on many kinds of knowledge. Along these lines, Dell Hymes noted that a member of a speech community must know when to speak and when not to, what to "talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner." Speakers not only form grammatically acceptable strings but at the same time perform through them social actions in contextually appropriate ways. Hymes further suggested that just as syntax exerts control over aspects of phonology and morphology, so too pragmatics might have some influence on aspects of language structure. If this is so, grammatical description and an understanding of competence should be part of a theory of language uses and functions. It is precisely this concern with language function that led some linguists to a significantly different view of the relation between competence and performance and to seriously re-evaluate the role of theory and explanation in linguistic argumentation. In generative theories of grammar, synchronic variation, which could not be adequately formalized in terms of transformational rules, had been assigned to the domain of performance. Thus, for example, the fact that some speakers occasionally say *They was going down there* is not taken as an indication that the speaker lacks adequate knowledge of person and number agreement in English. Within a sociolinguistic paradigm, on the other hand, speakers, in constructing such a sentence, are seen as making a choice as to which form to use (and also, potentially, whether to implement an agreement system or not). Over time such choices can lead to a system in which just one form is consistently used while the other becomes archaic or even

extinct. In this way it is possible, as Volosinov anticipated, to turn the old dichotomy on its head and see competence (or Saussure's *langue*) as a reflection of a history of performances (Saussure's *parole*). That is to say, synchronic grammar, which is itself a linguist's abstraction, is now understood as a partial reflection of a history of uses in context, and the relation between structure and use is understood in dynamic rather than static terms. Usage determines not only which form will win out in such cases—it also plays a role in the emergence of grammatical forms. Thus a linguistic element that begins its career as a contentive lexical item occurring in specific syntactic positions due to pragmatic constraints can over time lose its lexical meaning (a process sometimes referred to as "semantic bleaching") and come to indicate a purely grammatical relation. Such examples, of which there are many, illustrate the way in which change over time involves the reanalysis of existing forms—that is, a reworking of linguistic form within the competence of particular users. As such, competence is not some timeless set of generative abstractions and formalisms, but rather a highly dynamic system which undergoes continual modification. Recently Chomsky revised the distinction between competence and performance, and now prefers to speak of I(nternal) language and E(xternal) language. The change in terminology, however, involves no significant modification of the underlying abstraction (except a slight change of focus in the E-language/performance side of the dichotomy). Talmy Givón's twenty-year-old critique thus remains relevant—the abstraction devised as a point of methodological convenience has been elevated to a position of theoretical prominence in generative grammar. Ripped from its embeddedness in the social life of its users, language is reduced to "models of language" evaluated against one another in terms of their "economy," "simplicity," "efficiency," that is, in purely system-internal terms. In contrast, a socially informed perspective seeks to describe knowledge of language with a view to its fundamental role in communication between socially located actors in continuously changing human societies.

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