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## What is communicative competence?

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## Chapter 3

### What Is Communicative Competence?

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#### *What Does It Mean to “Know” a Language?*

Years ago the applied linguist S. Pit Corder (1973: 278) pointed out that knowing a language is a bit different from knowing something like history. If someone knows history we expect them to be able to explain it to others. This is what Corder called “cognitive knowledge”. Language is different: nearly everybody speaks one, but hardly anyone is prepared to explain how it works. It’s like knowing how to ride a bicycle even if you can’t tell someone else exactly how you do it.

Corder called this largely unconscious knowledge “performative knowledge”, but don’t confuse this with performance, the actual use of language. To use terms introduced in Chapter 1, performative knowledge is really the competence behind performance, or in de Saussure’s terms, the *langue* (underlying language system) behind *parole* (what people actually say).

The difference between cognitive and performative knowledge is crucial in language teaching. Linguists work very hard to develop their cognitive knowledge of language — to understand how language works — and we believe it’s valuable for language teachers and other language professionals to have such understandings as well — and indeed, that’s what this book is about. Even so, this doesn’t mean that it’s always useful to try to explain the workings of language to language learners. It’s a bit like teaching someone how to ride a bicycle: sometimes a bit of explanation can be helpful, but ultimately success depends on actually getting on the bike and giving it a try.

The average speaker’s “knowledge” of language is thus an unconscious competence. Linguists have sometimes viewed this a bit narrowly, with Chomsky (1957) introducing a notion of *linguistic competence* that focuses on just certain core aspects of language. To account for people’s ability to actually use language appropriately for real purposes, Hymes (e.g. 1972) introduced the much broader notion of *communicative competence*. The following sections build up to the latter concept little by little, by first considering linguistic competence and then introducing other competences that can be united in an overall notion of *communicative competence* at the end of the chapter.

#### *Linguistic (or “Grammatical”) Competence*

During the first half of the twentieth century linguists were still coming to grips with such smaller aspects of languages as their sound systems (phonology) and how words are put together (morphology). In the 1950s Chomsky (1957) began to make significant breakthroughs in the study of sentence structure (syntax), and in this connection he defined *linguistic competence* as the ability to understand and produce grammatical

sentences. Those concerned with more general communicative competence often refer to this component as “grammatical competence”, although it goes beyond what some people think of as grammar. It involves competence in the following areas, each illustrated by an example showing what it means to lack competence in the area:

- (a) Grammar (syntax and morphology). If you saw the movie *E.T.* you may recall how the extraterrestrial (called E.T.) made himself understood before he fully mastered English grammar, pointing at the sky while plaintively pleading *E.T. go home!* (for “I want to go home”).
- (b) Vocabulary — words and their meanings. As a friend from Torres Strait was learning English in his youth he was a bit surprised when he first heard of someone holding up a bank; he couldn’t understand how they could even lift it.
- (c) Pronunciation and (if you’re literate) the writing system. The former is the basis for the joke about the Japanese diplomat congratulating US President Clinton about his “erection” rather than his election.

It is important to keep in mind that *linguistic competence* refers to ability, not to actual performance. People don’t always perform in accord with their competence; they may get cut off by another speaker, for example, or they may simply make a slip of the tongue. For instance, in a telecast of the 1997 Italian Grand Prix a commentator suggested that a certain improvement to the race cars would “make them go faster, but not faster enough.” He quickly corrected this to “not fast enough”, making it clear that this aspect of his performance did not actually represent his linguistic competence.

It’s also important to realise that linguistic competence does not go beyond the ability to understand and produce grammatical sentences. Thus it doesn’t fully account for how people use language to accomplish real purposes, since they don’t do this by just spouting off miscellaneous sentences.

### *Speech acts and illocutionary competence*

Even for individual sentences one can go beyond linguistic competence by focusing on their purpose, viewing the sentences as *speech acts* (e.g. Searle 1969) that not only “say” something (their *locutionary force*) but also “do” something (their *illocutionary force*). Sometimes the two are much the same: for instance, “What time is it?” is a question and as such it’s a request for information. Sometimes the two are different, however: “Could you pass the cheese?” is also a question, but it’s not usually a request for information — one shouldn’t respond “Yes, I could”. Instead it normally has the illocutionary force of a request for action, i.e. to actually pass the cheese. This is what is called an *indirect speech act*, i.e. one that’s not to be taken literally.

These ideas will be developed further in Chapter 9, which deals with *pragmatics*, the relation between language and how it is actually used. Here, however, they are worth mentioning for two reasons. One is that the ability to use and interpret speech acts properly is clearly an aspect of communicative competence; Bachman (1990: 90-4) called this aspect *illocutionary competence*. Secondly, looking at sentences in terms of

what they “do” can help us understand how we use them to build longer stretches of discourse to accomplish larger tasks. In the following dialogue, for example, participants A and B are not simply exchanging words, but rather performing a series of acts (shown in brackets to the right) that help A overcome a problem:

- |    |  |                          |
|----|--|--------------------------|
| A: | My car has broken down.                | (providing information)  |
|    | Would there be a service station near? | (requesting information) |
| B: | Yes, just around the corner.           | (providing information)  |
| A: | Ah, thanks!                            | (expressing gratitude)   |

### *Beyond the Sentence: Discourse or Textual Competence*

Our ability to build coherent text or discourse out of sequences of speech acts is called either *discourse competence* or (by Bachman 1990: 88-9) *textual competence*. Part of this involves sequencing the speech acts in ways appropriate to the purpose. In the above exchange, for example, A appropriately ends off by expressing gratitude. If he had just walked away without that he would have seemed quite rude, while if he had started by expressing gratitude (e.g. “Thanks for your attention: my car has broken down...”) he would simply sound strange, or perhaps foreign.

For many common purposes, such as asking directions or writing a business letter, we simply follow well established routines. Nowadays the various types of routines are often called *genres*; as Martin (1984: 25) defined it, a genre is “a staged, goal oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of [their] culture”. This includes not only traditional literary genres (e.g. narratives, sonnets), but also other patterned uses of written and spoken language, such as how a recipe is set out (with a title, list of ingredients and the procedure) or how we go about dining in a restaurant (waiting to be seated, ordering, and so on).

Genres often vary from one culture to another and thus must be learned along with language. For example, in some countries making a purchase normally involves a stage of bargaining over the price, but we wouldn’t expect someone to do this in an Australian shop: our genre for making purchases is different.

Not all of what we say necessarily belongs to a single well-established genre. We may find that our conversation is turning into an argument, or we may simply be unsure of the best way to proceed in a situation that is new to us. In any case, however, we select speech acts to pursue our purpose as best we can, using our competence in grammar and in pragmatics (see Chapter 9) to produce discourse that is coherent and usually also cohesive.

What makes a text *coherent* is simply that it makes sense, and this can depend heavily on the situation and expectations of the participants. For example, the following shows everything that was said in an exchange between two strangers, A and B. Does it make sense to you?

- |    |                             |
|----|-----------------------------|
| A: | Civic, twenty? Twenty-five? |
| B: | Twenty-five, sir.           |

Black (1995: 27) reported this as an exchange that he (as A) had with a bus driver (B) in 1976 as he was boarding a bus for downtown Canberra, called Civic. With this information and the knowledge that some buses require fares to be paid upon boarding, the exchange should now seem coherent. It's amazing how little language may actually be needed when people share an understanding of the situation — and ah for the time when a bus ride was only twenty-five cents...

Many texts display *cohesion* as well as coherence; that is, the wording itself unites the text into a whole. You can see this in the present paragraph, the one that you're reading now. In part the cohesion is supported by the use of conjunctions and other logical links between clauses: in the first sentence, for example, the expression *that is* shows that the second clause is simply an explanation of the first. In part cohesion is promoted by the way old and new information is presented in sentences. For example, the second sentence above would sound a bit strange if we changed the word order to *In the present paragraph you can see this...*, starting with the new information *in the present paragraph* before using *this* to tie it in with what's already been talked about.

Cohesion is also supported by the way the continuity of ideas is apparent from repeated references to the same thing. This can be done through the repetition of words (e.g. the words *cohesion* and *clause(s)* in the above paragraph) or the use of synonyms (e.g. *is supported by* and *is promoted by*) or pronouns (e.g. *this* in *You can see this in the present paragraph* refers to the whole of the first sentence, while *one* in *the one that you're reading now* refers back to the word *paragraph*). Using pronouns to refer back to earlier expressions is an example of *anaphoric reference* (or *anaphora*). It is also possible but less common to use pronouns to refer to things soon to come, as in *If you want it you can have my old sofa*, where *it* refers ahead to *sofa*; this is called *cataphoric reference* (or *cataphora*).

The above is just a brief introduction to some of the factors speakers need to cope with as part of their discourse competence. Naturally a linguist or language teacher has to deal with the same factors if they want to analyse longer stretches of language, a task usually referred to as *discourse analysis*.

### *Sociolinguistic Competence and Code Choice*

A different sort of competence is the sociolinguistic ability to choose appropriate speech varieties to use in particular social situations. In general this is called *code choice*, where the “codes” may include distinct languages, as in such multilingual societies as among Aboriginal people in Alice Springs (see Harkins 1994: 9-29), or — as in the case of most English speakers — they may simply be different *registers*, i.e. the right types of English to suit the situation at hand. For example, you might tell your child to “Get inside the house”, but if you were talking to your boss you'd probably say something more like “Please go on in.”

This examples illustrates an aspect of register that is sometimes called *style*, which relates to relative degrees of politeness and familiarity or formality and informality. Mastering this is an important aspect of communicative competence in English, lest the

learner sound too rude on the one hand or else stiffly formal and unfriendly on the other. An extreme example of the former would be a migrant who learned English while working on construction projects and thus thought it was normal to pepper his English with four-letter words.

Another aspect of register is how language relates to particular subject matter, such as particular occupations; this is the original, narrower meaning of the term *register*. Sometimes the association is so close that any competent user of English can easily guess the context from just a small stretch of the language; for example, we can expect to hear *the defence rests* in court, *howzat* at a cricket game, and *it's your shout* in an Australian pub.

### *Strategic Competence and Conversational Maxims*

Strategic competence is a more general ability to manage communication effectively, overcoming any mistakes or other difficulties in order to accomplish one's goals. As one sort of example, consider our general expectations of how people interact in language. In this regard Grice (1975) proposed a *cooperative principle*, namely that one should "contribute meaningfully to the accepted purpose and direction of conversation" (Hudson 2000: 323). More specifically this involves four conversational maxims, namely:

- *Relevance*: be relevant.
- *Quality*: don't lie or say things for which you don't have evidence.
- *Quantity*: be only as informative as required, not more or less.
- *Manner*: be brief and orderly, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

These are expectations, not inviolable rules: people do tell lies, for example, but we tend to find this disturbing because it's not our normal expectation. Whether or not these expectations are universal, applying to all cultures, is another matter. For example, I suspect that the maxim of quality may not always apply among the Amhara of Ethiopia. While living in Ethiopia in the 1970s I sometimes found the people would listen to me and then ask me to tell them what really happened, as if they didn't expect one to normally tell the truth. At the same time it seemed that total strangers on the street felt no compunction against asking personal questions and making impossible requests ("Can you get me a scholarship to the US?"), perhaps simply because they didn't expect truthful answers anyway. In any case, whether such conversational expectations are universal or culturally specific, they certainly provide one basis for the strategic competence we use to manage our interactions.

### *"Cultural Competence"*

A finally factor that seriously affects our ability to communicate might be called "cultural competence"; it's our culturally based knowledge of the world. Consider the following sentence, for example: *I had a flat, so I got the jack out of the boot*. Most competent speakers of Australian English would have no difficulty in understanding that this was about a car with a flat tyre, even though no car or tyre is actually mentioned.

With many other members of our culture we share the knowledge that cars have tyres and boots, that tyres can go flat, and that jacks are used in changing flat tyres.

Such shared understandings are sometimes referred to as *schemata* (the plural of *schema*) or *frames*, and such words as *flat*, *jack*, and *boot* are said to help us call to mind a “flat tyre schema” or frame that includes such notions as how cars have tyres, boots and jacks. Note that the meaning is not entirely in the words themselves, since in a different context the same words can evoke quite a different schema. What does the following sentence bring to mind? — *Before he left his flat he slipped two aces and a jack into the top of his boot.*

Perhaps some of these understandings are universal, but many vary from one culture to another and must be learned along with a new language. For example, upon coming to Australia a colleague of mine from the West Indies experienced various difficulties for lack of shared understandings. When asked to “bring a plate” to a social gathering he didn’t realise that the custom was to bring one with food on it (his wife suggested he just bring one of their old plates, not the good china). And when told by friends in a pub that it was his “shout”, he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to shout about. Note that both of these examples go beyond simply learning the vocabulary involved (*plate* and *shout*); they also involve learning the culturally based expectations about behaviour.

#### *Communicative Competence: An Overview*

All of the above factors are elements of our more general communicative competence, our ability to use language for real purposes. Note all have been equally prominent in the literature. Following Canale (1983) communicative competence is often divided into just four components, although perhaps they may be thought of as including the others:

- (a) Grammatical (or linguistic) competence
- (b) Sociolinguistic competence
- (c) Discourse competence
- (d) Strategic competence

Bachman (1990: 81-110) presented a somewhat more elaborate and insightful account of what is essentially communicative competence, although he referred to it “communicative language ability”. Firstly he took many of the factors discussed earlier to be components of what he called “language competence”:

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| (a) Grammatical (or linguistic) competence | ((a) and (b) can be grouped together |
| (b) Textual (or discourse) competence      | as “organisational competence”)      |
| (c) Illocutionary competence and           | ((c) and (d) can be grouped together |
| (d) Sociolinguistic competence             | as “pragmatic competence”)           |

Secondly he saw strategic competence as playing a central role in managing the interrelationships among three major components, namely (i) the above linguistic competence, (ii) the “knowledge of the world” that I have called “cultural competence”, and (iii) the “psychophysical mechanisms” that allow us to perceive communication from others within the situation at hand and to respond with our own communicative

behaviours. To put it differently, at the highest level our communicative competence involves using our strategic competence to integrate our (i) linguistic resources and (ii) cultural understandings to enable (iii) our minds and bodies to interact with others.

Thus far the chapter has focused on language without noting that we also communicate non-verbally, e.g. through gesture (e.g. nodding the head “yes”), eye contact, and bodily stance (e.g. turning one’s back on someone). However, it is not difficult to accommodate such non-verbal communication within the same general framework. Note, for example, that Martin (1984: 25) defined genre as a type of “activity” actually accommodates various non-verbal behaviour. For example, buying something in a shop usually involves handing over money or a credit card to pay for the goods, and no amount of verbiage can make up for a lack of payment.

A recent “Multiliteracies” movement in language education (cf. Cope and Kalantzis 2000) has recognised the importance of integrating language with such other modes of communication as graphics, spatial arrangement, and sound, as in the production of videos and other multimedia. If one cared to, one could easily take the notion of communicative competence to cover these as well. After all, no person is fully competent in all uses of language alone, e.g. to be equally comfortable with pleading a case in a courtroom, presenting a seminar on nuclear physics, and interacting as a member of a bikie gang. Communicative competence is not just a single ability that we have less or more of; instead we have different degrees of competence for doing a range of different things. Accordingly there is no particular reason why communicating through multimedia should not be one of them.

### *Summary*

We have seen, then, that “knowing” a language may or may not involve the cognitive knowledge of knowing how the language works, but it always involves competence in the use of the language. This communicative competence goes far beyond mere the linguistic or “grammatical” competence of being able to understand and produce grammatical sentences; it also includes the ability to understand what language is being used to do (illocutionary competence), how to build discourse (discourse or textual competence), and how to choose the appropriate language to suit the social situation (sociolinguistic competence). Our more general strategic competence helps integrate these language resources with our more general knowledge of the world (“cultural competence”) to use our minds and bodies to participate in communication with others.

### *Exercises*

#### (i) Components of communicative competence

Each of the following examples is a bit odd for some reason or another. In each case describe the oddity and decide whether it might represent a problem with linguistic, discourse, illocutionary, sociolinguistic, or cultural competence.

- (a) She don’t can do that.
- (b) The hypothesis that you’re a bonzer bloke remains to be established.
- (c) (Customer to greengrocer:) Five apples, please, and gift wrap them.



- (d) The pilot is the one who drives the aeroplane.
- (e) I'm looking for my friend but I can't find my friend.
- (f) My spelling chequer tolled me that this is awl rite.
- (g) (woman to waiter:) I'd like the soup of the day.  
(waiter in response:) I'd like a BMW, myself.
- (h) The book is heavy, so they'll sell the car.
- (i) We use this machine to check for cancer of the boobs, Mrs Wilson.
- (j) How much is the fare to take the lift to the seventh floor?

(ii) Register

Can you guess the context that each of the following examples were taken from? What features of the language help you decide?

- (a) Two killed in island violence.
- (b) Simmer on low heat while stirring slowly.
- (c) That'll be twenty-four ninety-five, please.
- (d) I'll second that.
- (e) Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...
- (f) ARRIVING QF32 TOMORROW PLEASE MEET
- (g) What's the matter, dear, aren't we sleepy?
- (h) Objection overruled.
- (i) How much is eleven take four?
- (j) Morn came and went — and came, and brought no day,...

(iii) Speech Acts

Decide whether each of the following is likely to be meant as a direct speech act (to be taken literally) or an indirect speech act (not to be taken literally). How might each of the indirect speech acts be rephrased as an equivalent direct speech act?

- (a) Could you really resist such an attractive job offer?
- (b) Could you pass me the salt?
- (c) What can we possibly lose by doing that?
- (d) What can we do to increase our income?
- (e) I'd like some more coffee.
- (f) I'd like to tell her how I really feel about it.
- (g) Where's the best place to visit in Australia?
- (h) Where's my breakfast?
- (i) Your radio is making too much noise!
- (j) Your radio is smaller than I thought!

*Questions for Discussion*

(a) Think of some cross-cultural situations in which communication went wrong. Can you work out what caused the problems and what components of communicative competence were involved?

(b) How important is linguistic competence to communicative competence? That is, to what extent can people communicate without mastering such things as grammar and pronunciation?

(c) Writers on Multiliteracies maintain that there is “no singular, canonical English that either could or should be taught any more” (Cope and Kalantzis 2000: 5). To what extent should teachers of English introduce their students to a range of varieties (whether dialects or registers), and why?

(d) Consider Grice’s four conversational maxims. To what extent do we actually expect people to adhere to them, and for what reasons might people violate them?

(e) Students often confuse genre and register. What are the defining characteristics of each? What sorts of things represent different genres and what represent different registers? Do particular genres tend to be related to particular registers?

(f) To what extent and in what ways do people communicate non-verbally as well as through language? How might such non-verbal communication fit into communicative competence as described in this chapter?

### *Sample Projects*

#### (a) Cultural Understandings

When I first came to Australia in 1974 I found it difficult to read the newspapers for lack of local knowledge (shared understandings): such names as *Whitlam* and *the Liberals* were close to meaningless for me. Find a recent newspaper article that could pose similar difficulties for English learners. List the specific shared understandings that the article assumes the reader to have but which English learners may lack. You may also want to go on to suggest how such cultural understandings might best be learned, whether inside or outside the classroom.

#### (b) Discourse Competence

Find a short text of perhaps a dozen sentences or so, such as a newspaper article. (A portion of a longer text may do if it is from the beginning of a major section, such as a chapter; it should not depend on anything that came earlier.) Reproduce each sentence on a separate piece of paper, scramble them so that they are no longer in order, and ask a friend who has not seen the original to try to reassemble them into a coherent text. Record his or her reasons for putting them in the order that was chosen, and note to what extent this order did or did not match the original order. Conclude by relating this to the nature of discourse competence.

#### (c) Genre

Select one relatively simple written or spoken genre, such as recipes, particular types of classified advertisements, minutes of meetings, or how one goes about buying food from a fast food place. Working from a variety of examples, see if you can identify patterns in how examples of the genre proceed in stages (what’s first, what’s next, etc.) and the nature of the language associated with each stage. Think in terms of what English learners would need to learn in order to master the genre.

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