

The Relationship between Competence and Performance: Towards a Comprehensive TG Grammar

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1. Introduction

Chomsky's Syntactic Structures (1957) has proved to be a turning point in the twentieth century's linguistics. He proposes his linguistic theory of generative grammar, which departed radically from the structuralism and behaviourism of the previous decades. Earlier analyses of sentences have been shown to be inadequate in more than one respect because they failed to take into account the differences between 'surface' and 'deep' levels of grammatical structure.

A major aim of generative grammar was to provide a means of analysing sentences that take account of this underlying level of structure. To achieve this aim, Chomsky drew a fundamental distinction (similar to Saussure's *langue* and *parole*) between a person's knowledge of the rules of a language and the actual use of that language in real situations. The first he referred to as competence; the second as performance. Linguistics, he argued, should be concerned with the study of competence, and not restrict itself to performance.

Chomsky's proposals have been intended to discover the mental realities underlying the way people use language; competence, accordingly, is seen as an aspect of the human general psychological capacity. Linguistics has been envisaged as a 'mentalist discipline'. It is also argued that linguistics should not limit itself to the description of competence. In the long term, there should be still more powerful target: to provide a grammar capable of evaluating the adequacy of different accounts of competence and of going beyond the study of individual languages to the nature of human language as a whole by discovering linguistic universals. In this way, it is hoped, linguistics would be able to contribute to the understanding of the nature of human mind.

A major feature of Chomsky's approach was the technical apparatus he devised to make the notion of competence explicit: the system of rules and symbols that provides a formal representation of underlying syntactic, semantic, and phonological structure of sentence (Crystal, 1987: 409). Clark and Clark (1977: 6) state that Chomsky distinguishes between linguistic competence, one's capacity to use language, and performance, the actual application of this competence in *speaking* and *listening*.

Hence, studying competence sheds the light on the very intricate mental phenomenon called language and the highly complicated nature of language processing inside human mind, on the one hand. It, further, reflects on the hard task of the grammarian who is trying to provide a detailed account of the various aspects of language, on the other hand. This is what the present paper tries to highlight.

2. Competence

2.1 Definition

Competence is a term used in linguistic theory, especially in generative grammar, to refer to person's knowledge of his language, the system of rules which a language user has mastered so that it would be possible for that user to be able to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences and recognise grammatical mistakes and ambiguities.

Competence is said to be an idealised conception of language, which is seen in opposition to the notion of performance which refers to the specific utterances of speech. Competence, according to Chomsky, has been used as a reaction to the linguistic era before generative grammars, which was highly occupied with performance in forms of corpus of data. The aim set by the transformationalists to their work is higher than that explicitly set by any previous group of linguists. It amounts to nothing less than presenting a description of a language, everything implied by the linguistic competence of a native speaker.

The transformationalists' objectives are to be attained by forming linguistic descriptions in terms of rules that embody the creative capacity of a native speaker to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences that are all and only grammatical (Robins, 1979: 228).

Competence, according to McNeil (1966: 77), is the knowledge of linguistic rules, categories, etc., that

accounts for native speaker's intuitions about his language; the expression of such competence in talking and listening is performance. Robins (1980: 37) states that Chomsky defines competence as what a speaker intuitively knows about his language. In these terms, speech production and speech comprehension are both categories of linguistic performance; both involve the expression of competence, the one in producing or encoding speech, the other in receiving or decoding speech.

2.2 Types of Competence

Talking about the native speaker's linguistic knowledge, Chomsky uses the term '*linguistic competence*'. At the outset, linguistic knowledge could have been thought of as one entity that could best be described in terms of the grammatical rules of a language. This, in fact, has been a general tendency of language description at the sentence level before the development of language analysis at higher levels such as text analysis and conversational analysis by both discourse analysts and speech ethnographers respectively. Thus, linguistic competence is the first version of competence which has met a strong line of criticism.

2.2.1 Communicative Competence

A particularly strong line of criticism emerged in the notion of '**communicative competence**'. This type of competence is different from the linguistic one in the sense that communicative competence focuses on the native

speaker's ability to produce and understand sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they occur, i.e., what that speaker really needs to know in order to communicate effectively in socially distinctive settings. In other words, this view of competence differs from the linguistic one in the idea that the latter concentrates much on the formal terms of linguistic knowledge while the former is concerned with terms like, context, setting, the relation between the speaker and hearer, and any other environmental factors that are believed to be systematic within a certain community. It, then, subsumes the social determinants of linguistic behaviour, including, such environmental matters as the relationship between speaker and hearer, and the pressures that stem from the time and place of speaking, etc. If speakers have a tacit awareness of such communicative constraints, it is argued, then a linguistic theory ought to aim at providing an explicit account of these factors, insofar as these are systematic within a community, and not restrict itself to the analysis of structure in purely formal terms.

'Communicative competence' is used to refer to the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form correct utterances, but also to know when to use these utterances appropriately. Hymes (1972) coins it as a reaction to Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. Hymes believes that such a distinction was inadequate as it limits itself to one kind of competence called 'linguistic competence'. Since Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance in terms of linguistic knowledge and Hymes' first use of the term communicative competence, various definitions have been given.

Although Yule (1996: 197) states that communicative competence can be defined in terms of three components (1) ‘grammatical competence’, (2) ‘sociolinguistic competence’, and (3) ‘strategic competence’, Canale (1983) and Canale Swain (1980), brought various expanded notions of communicative competence. For Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence minimally consists of four components:

1. grammatical competence: words and rules
2. sociolinguistic competence: appropriateness
3. discourse competence: cohesion and coherence, and
4. strategic competence: appropriate use of communication strategies.

Another useful model is developed by Van Ek (1986 and 1987). He thinks that the ‘communicative ability’ of a speaker consists of six components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, socio-cultural competence and social competence. In comparison to Canale’s classification, Van Ek separates socio-cultural competence from sociolinguistic competence and adds social competence as a different component. For Van Ek, social competence includes “motivation, attitude and self-confidence” or “empathy and the ability to handle social situations” which are involved in the will or skill to interact (Yoshida, 2003: 4).

Yet, a more recent survey of communicative competence by Bachman (1990) in Yoshida (2003) divides it into the broad headings of:

1. Organizational competence which includes:

- a. grammatical competence , and
- b. discourse (or textual) competence.

2. Pragmatic competence which includes:

- a. sociolinguistic competence, and
- b. illocutionary competence

2.2.1.1 Grammatical Competence

The native speaker's *grammatical competence*, i.e., his knowledge of his language, subsumes three primary kinds of linguistic ability: *syntactic*, *semantic* and *phonological*. The first refers to the ability to combine words together so as to form grammatical sentences, the second to the speaker's intuition about the semantic well-formedness or ill-formedness of sentences, and the third to his intuition about the phonological well-formedness or ill-formedness and phonological structure of sentences in a language (Radford, 1988: 3-7).

Grammatical competence remains concerned with mastery of the language code (verbal or non-verbal) itself. Thus included here are features and rules of the language such as vocabulary, word formation (morphology), sentence formation (syntax), pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics (Yoshida, 2003: 3).

2.2.1.2 Sociolinguistic Competence

One of Hymes (1972) contributions to the study of competence is the notion of sociolinguistic appropriateness where he distinguishes between what is possible, what is feasible, what is appropriate, and what is actually done in the use of communicative language. For (Swain, 1984: 188 in Yoshida (2003)), sociolinguistic competence

addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts, depending on contextual factors such as topic, status of participants, and purposes of the interactions. Appropriate-ness of utterances refers to both appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form

Sociolinguistic competence is then said to be concerned with *appropriateness* in terms of both form and meaning, i.e., whether an utterance is appropriately produced or understood in different contexts. This appropriateness could vary in accordance with the status of participants, objectives of the communication and norms of the communication (Yoshida, 2003: 3).

2.2.1.3 Discourse Competence

Canale and Swain (1980) do not use the term, discourse competence, but they included the notion of cohesion and coherence in sociolinguistic competence. However, the researchers refer to discourse competence as the mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres. Unity of a text is achieved through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. For Yoshida (2003: 3), discourse

competence refers to mastery of the way grammatical forms and meanings are combined to develop *consistent and meaningful texts*, i.e., how texts are developed as a result of the combination of grammar and meaning. That is why it is sometimes called *textual competence*.

This type of competence is related to cohesion and coherence in utterances. The idea of cohesion and coherence, as described by Halliday and Hasan (1976), is that cohesion refers to the linguistic features that relate sentences to one another and coherence refers to text that appropriately fits its situational context. Thus, when a text is consistent internally, it is cohesive; when it is consistent with its context, it is coherent. (For a better understanding of the notions of cohesion and coherence see also Widdowson (1978), and Richards and Schmidt (1983))

2.2.1.4 Strategic Competence

Reporting Canale and Swain's (1980: 30) definition, Yoshida (2003: 3) states, "Strategic competence is verbal [and] non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to *performance* variables or to insufficient competence". Canale (1983) later extended the definition of strategic competence as:

- a. to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to insufficient competence or to performance limitations and
- b. to enhance the rhetorical effect of utterances.

He (ibid: 339) explains that the use of such communication strategies is necessary for two main reasons:

1. To compensate for problems in communication because of the limited development of the other areas of communicative competence,
2. To compensate for problems which are caused by limiting conditions, such as not being able to remember momentarily an idea or a grammatical form.

For PACTE (2000), strategic competence includes all the individual procedures, whether conscious and unconscious or verbal and non-verbal, used to solve the problems found during the translation process. The problem-solving process can be described as a series of acts or recursive, complex acts that lead from an initial state to an objective... Examples of strategies are: distinguishing between main and secondary ideas, establishing conceptual relationships, searching for information, paraphrasing, back translating, translating out loud, and establishing an order for documenta-tion, etc. It is worth noting here that this kind of specification to translation could be generalised to include all communication processes. In one of its senses, communication could be considered as a process of translation.

In fact, the view of communicative competence has received a wide measure of acceptance, though not that progression has been made over modelising it in precise terms (Brown, 1984: 45).

2.2.2 Pragmatic Competence

Some linguists such as Crystal (1985: 60), more recently and analogously, talk about the notion of '*pragmatic competence*'. It is Chomsky who distinguishes between grammatical and pragmatic competence, the former is related to language structure but the latter to language use (Radford, 1988: 3-7). Pragmatics is said to be essentially concerned with the role played by non-linguistic information such as background knowledge and personal beliefs in the use and interpretation of sentences. "It is the native speaker's pragmatic competence which enables him to bring into play non-linguistic information in the interpretation of such sentences" (Ibid: 3)

2.2.3 Literary Competence

Literary Competence has also been proposed by the French theorist Ronald Barthes to refer to the native speaker's ability to handle the special properties of literary language. It comes in a way similar to Chomsky's emphasis on the creative abilities of the speaker (Crystal, 1987: 79). In answering a question like: where can the meaning of the literary text be found?, a number of controversial issues has emerged or re-emerged to be capable of handling the special properties of literary language.

In this regard, a special emphasis has been put on the notion that the meaning of any literary text is not to be found in the language of that text itself. Instead it is the reader himself who can construct the text's meaning. A text then, according to this viewpoint has no separate

identity outside the intuition of its reader. A comprehensive understanding of a text could be deduced from a set of factors: some of which are of linguistic cohesion and others are of the-world-of-text coherence. Thus, the text unity in ideas is achieved by the reader's ability to deduce the internal relationships between the fragments of that text.

2.3 A Theory of Linguistic Competence

The tacit rules of a language can be viewed as specifying the set of sentences that could occur in the language. Thus, the rules that one knows determine the set of possible sentences for him to produce. These rules are said to compose or to make up the linguistic competence possessed by the speaker of a particular language. Accordingly, one of the major tasks of the psycholinguist is to discover and state the nature of these rules, to develop a theory of linguistic competence of speakers of the language. This theory is called grammar of the language. Such a theory should be able to state the rules that are tacitly known as the knowledge that permits the speaker to make judgments about whether or not utterances are grammatical. This knowledge, moreover, permits to make other judgments as well: individuals, for instance, who know language can judge whether or not an utterance is ambiguous such as in:

- Flying planes can be dangerous

or whether or not two utterances are synonymous:

- Man may commit mistakes.

- It is man that may commit mistakes.

Slobin (1966: 85) states that the child is born not with a set of linguistic categories but with some sort of process mechanisms, i.e. a set of procedures and inference rules, which he uses to process linguistic data. An example of these mechanisms is what the child can apply to the input data in order to end up with something which is a member of class of human languages, i.e. the particular language of that child. Accordingly, the linguistic universals are the result of an *innate cognitive competence* rather than the *content* of such a competence. This innate ability is what Chomsky (1961: 1965) and Katz (1966) quoted in McNeil (1966: 38) refer to as a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) or System (LAS). LAD receives primary linguistic data -essentially a corpus of speech from fluent speakers within hearing range- as input and has grammatical competence as output. It can be schematically represented as follows:



The properties of LAD will explain the linguistic intuition of adults because it determines the properties of grammatical competence.

The most striking aspect of linguistic competence is what might be called '*Creativity of Language*', i.e. the speaker's *ability* to produce new sentences that are immediately understood by other speakers though they bear no physical resemblance to sentences which are "familiar" (Alien and Buren, 197: 8). It is the infinitely

creative aspect of the native speaker's knowledge of his language that distinguishes Chomsky's and other transformationalists' conception of competence from what they consider the more static Saussurean conception of **langue** (Robins, 1979: 228).

2.3.1 Linguistic Intuitions

Foss and Hakes (1978: 17) believe that developing grammar is not that easy task simply because the knowledge of rules of a particular language, or language in general for the universal grammarians, is tacit. Since linguists are neither capable of asking speakers what these rules are, nor can they observe the rules operating in themselves, they believe that these rules must be inferred from what can be observed. Because they cannot bring rules into conscious awareness, linguists observe the utterances that speakers are able to produce and understand. Besides, those linguists might evaluate the kind of judgments the speakers can make about utterances. These judgments are collectively referred to as the *linguistic intuition* that speakers have about their language.

Linguistic intuitions, then, are part of the data that linguists use when they are constructing a theory of linguistic competence. These intuitions are, of course, not the competence itself; they are merely a reflection of it. Competence is the set of tacit rules and linguists use various kinds of data to aid in constructing a theory of linguistic competence, i.e. grammar.

2.3.2 Grammar

Clark and Clark (1977: 6) state that a grammar is a statement of competence, whereas comprehension and production are parts of the theory of performance, thus, one can claim that there is one grammar that feeds both kinds of performance. Chomsky gives an essential *mental* answer to the question of what grammar is. A grammar for him is a model, i.e. systematic description, of those linguistic abilities of the native speaker of a language which enable him to speak and understand language fluently. These linguistic abilities are termed by Chomsky as the competence of the native speaker. Thus, a grammar of language is a model of the linguistic competence of the fluent native speaker of the language (Radford, 1981:2).

3. Performance

3.1 Definition

In linguistics, the term "performance" has two senses: (1) a technique used in phonetics whereby aspiring practitioners of the subject are trained to control the use of their vocal organs; and (2) a term used in the linguistic theory of transformational generative grammar, to refer to language seen as a set of specific utterances produced by native speakers, as encountered in a corpus. The distinction between performance and competence in the transformational generative grammar, however, has been severely criticised as being not that clear-cut, and there are problems, often in deciding whether a particular speech feature, such as intonation or discourse, is a matter of competence or performance (Crystal, 1985: 59).

The utterances of performance will contain features irrelevant to the abstract rule system, such as hesitation and unfinished structures, arising from the various psychological and social difficulties acting upon the speaker (e.g. lapses of memory, or biological limitations such as pauses being introduced through the need to breathe). These features must be discounted in a grammar of the language which deals with the systematic processes of sentence construction (Crystal, 1985: 224-5).

3.2 A Theory of Linguistic Performance

Although linguistic competence lies at the heart of the knowledge of a language, it is clear that speakers of that language know more than just the grammar of that language. A grammar specifies the rules that the speaker knows but it does not state how they can make use of that knowledge. In other words, grammar does not say how this knowledge enables the speakers to produce utterances and to understand them. Nor does it tell him/her how to acquire that knowledge. Thus, the grammar which the linguists try to construct characterises only one part of the speaker's knowledge.

Other additional parts of the linguistic knowledge are accounted for in terms of the theory of linguistic performance: it describes the psychological process involved in using the linguistic competence in all ways that the speaker can actually use it. These psychological processes include: producing utterances, understanding

them, making judgments about them and acquiring the ability to do these things, etc.

Developing such a theory of psychological processes involving language is the task, which is not easy, of the psycholinguist who attempts to develop a theory. What has been noticed is that utterances which speakers actually produce contain errors. The utterances do not always reflect the speaker's intention. Some errors are described by Crystal (1985a) as an outcome of non- linguistic factors such as chewing a gum, short in memory, tiredness, etc. Some hearers, sometimes, misunderstand or fail to understand the utterances they hear. Because of such factors, performance does not always accurately reflect competence.

3.3 Language Behaviour

Among the different approaches to the study of language is the approach to language as a system. It attempts to account for the linguistic competence that underlies language as a system. However, it should be stressed that many linguists do not see the need for the consultation of informants, i.e. native speakers of language, and the effort to treat their own language as though they had never heard it before. Instead, they treat their own intuitions (cf. 2.3.1) about language as adequate data.

Some such linguists, especially Chomsky, claim that their task is to describe the language user's competence. Instead of speaking of language as a system external to its users, they insert their formal system into the user's

language. They, then, claim that the user's actual language behaviour, i.e. his performance, is but an indirect reflection of his competence (Herroit, 1970: 14).

3.4 Performance as a Reflection of Competence

Competence which is the fluent native speaker's knowledge of his language is contrasted with performance which refers to what people actually say or understand by what someone else say on a given occasion. Very often, performance is an imperfect reflection of competence, e.g. the fact that people make occasional 'slips of the tongue' in everyday conversation does not mean that they do not know their language or do not have fluency (i.e. competence) in it. 'Slips of the tongue' and similar phenomena are, for Chomsky, performance errors attributable to a variety of performance factors like tiredness, boredom, drunkenness, drugs, external distraction and so forth (Radford, 1981: 2; Gleason and Ratner, 1993: 206). These phenomena are attributed by Yule (1996: 165) to the difficulty in getting the brain and speech production to work together smoothly.

According to some schools that appeared during the period from the beginning towards the middle of the 20th century, language can best be studied according to speech and writing. These two activities represent for the behaviourist the actual measurable behaviour. Thus, in order to describe language and write down its rules, the best way is to analyse either or both of these activities. This can be seen in the attempts of some structuralists like C.C.Fries in his attempts to read letters and listen to telephone calls directly. Those structuralists believe that

any description of language should begin and end in the description of the native speakers' verbal behaviour.

This approach to language displays the effect of behaviorism on the general climate of language study (see Bloomfield, 1933: Fries, 1952 and Sampson, 1980: chapter 3)

Dissatisfied with this approach to language, the Chomskyians suggest a new approach to the study of language .Their views are based on the newly emerged psychological school of rationalism .They believe that the linguist's task in the description of language is not to write down rules and to describe language as a system independent from its users but instead language should be seen as part of the world of the user. The linguist, then, should describe the internal linguistic knowledge of the speaker as well as his external linguistic behaviour. More precisely; his task is to use the latter in order to account for the former.

In this regard, they believe that the actual utterances of the native speaker are not really sufficient for a better understanding of man linguistic knowledge .They, therefore, adopt two basic types of inferences, the first is to be taken from the informants, i.e. native speaker's, responses to language as a system; and the second from " an intuitively deduced system to human functioning" (Herriot, 1970: 14).

3.5 Theories of Linguistic Competence and Performance

Since the way the speakers' knowledge of how to produce and understand utterances, just like their knowledge of the rules of language, is tacit knowledge, the psycholinguist's task in attempting to develop a theory of linguistic performance is not easier than the linguist's task of developing a theory of linguistic competence,

Evidently, the theories of linguistic competence and performance are going to be closely related. The psychological processes involved in the use of linguistic knowledge depend upon the nature of that knowledge, and the nature of the knowledge itself is dependent upon the nature of the processes whereby they are used.

Given this closeness of relationship, it is not surprising that the task of the linguist and that of the psycholinguists often overlap. Essentially, one is a theory of language, i.e. of the structure of the language's phonological, syntactic and semantic systems, while the other is a theory of both knowledge and processes. The psycholinguist wants to state how the linguistic knowledge is represented in the *cognitive system*. Additionally, he wants to identify the psychological processes that utilise this knowledge, such as production and comprehension for instance, (Foss and Hakes, 1978: 18).

An explanation of production-comprehension differences will come from a performance model that states, among other things, what the 'parameters' of conversion are for production and comprehension and how

they differ. In this framework, a distinction between active and passive grammar, which some have wanted to draw, is not necessary (McNeil, 1966:77).

4. Conclusions

The study of competence as the linguistic knowledge of the native speaker and performance as the actual production or utterance of that speaker is not an easy task. Not because the former is abstract while the latter is concrete, but also because there is no way to access to one's linguistic competence. The informant is no more the native speaker only, nor is the linguist himself; it is the psycholinguist as well. The linguist tries to infer the components of competence via studying the observable outcome, i.e. performance, and to make use of his/her own linguistic intuition. Thus, within a framework of a linguistic theory of competence only a grammar seems difficult to be formed.

Furthermore, a grammar that linguists try to construct within a theory of linguistic performance characterises only one part of the speaker's knowledge. It describes the psychological process involved in using the linguistic competence in all ways that the speaker can actually use it. These psychological processes include: producing and understanding utterances, making judgments about them and acquiring abilities to do such things, etc.

However, it is not surprising that the task of the linguist and that of psycholinguists often overlap. The former's target is a theory of language, i.e. that of the structure of the language's phonological, syntactic and

semantic systems; the latter's is a theory of both knowledge and process. The psycholinguist aims to state how the linguistic knowledge is represented in the *cognitive system* and wants to identify the psychological processes, such as production and comprehension for instance, that utilise this knowledge.

Being a model of those linguistic abilities that enable the native speaker of a language to understand that language and speak it fluently, grammar seems difficult to be explicitly stated. Competence is not always reflected by performance in a perfect way. The performance of a speaker could be affected by some non- linguistic factors such as boredom, tiredness, drunkenness, or even chewing a gum, etc. Furthermore, limiting such a grammar to linguistic knowledge only or to the account of psycholinguistic processes only ultimately implies a great loss of the relevant non-linguistic information such as background knowledge and personal beliefs which are essential in the pragmatic interpretation of sentence, i.e. within the pragmatic or literary competence.

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الملخص

منذ اللحظة التي أدار جومسكي دفة القيادة في الدراسات اللغوية باتجاه نفس- لغوي ذهني عقلائي كانت فكرتي المعرفة اللغوية (competence) لمتكلمي اللغة و الأداء اللغوي (performance) لأولئك المتكلمين موضوع بحث عريض. وقد استلهمهما الكثير من العلماء في مجالي اللغة و الأدب و عدّوهما من أفضل تفسيراتهم للظاهرة اللغوية عند الإنسان. وعليه فلقد تعددت أنواع المعرفة اللغوية وفقا للمنظور الذي يتبناه الباحث في تحليله اللغوي واحتاج الباحثون لإعادة النظر بمفهوم النحو (grammar). ولعل من بين الأسئلة الحرجة في هذا المجال هو "لماذا لم يقدم النحويون التحويليون-التوليديون نحا شاملا لأية لغة لحد الآن؟" وقد حاولت نظريات المعرفة اللغوية ونظريات الأداء اللغوي تسليط الأضواء على نوع الصعوبات التي يواجهها أولئك النحويون.