

## Lecture 1: Introduction (Dell Hymes: Criticism of Chomsky's Ideas on Language)

### Communicative competence

The phrase 'communicative competence' was introduced by the North American linguist and anthropologist, Dell Hymes, in the late 1960s. He used it to reflect the following key positions on knowledge and use of language:

- The ability to use a language well involves knowing (either explicitly or implicitly) how to use language appropriately in any given context.
- The ability to speak and understand language is not based solely on grammatical knowledge.
- What counts as appropriate language varies according to context and may involve a range of modes – for example, speaking, writing, singing, whistling, drumming.
- Learning what counts as appropriate language occurs through a process of socialization into particular ways of using language through participation in particular communities.

The notion of [communicative competence](#) refers to an individual's capability to communicate successfully in terms of both effectiveness (goal achievement) and appropriateness (acceptability in relation to context). The concept is related to debates about the nature of language and was developed by Hymes as a counter concept to Chomsky's proposal of [linguistic competence](#). In contrast to this theoretical position, the concept of communicative competence sees language primarily as a means of communication, intertwined with other communicative media, coupled with and based upon other cognitive and social abilities, related to performance, and comprising all aspects of language including illocutionary and [sociolinguistic](#) knowledge, in contrast to being confined to grammar (in terms of syntactic, phonological, and semantic rules). The notion has also been developed within second-language teaching and interpersonal communication research. Depending on the specific focus of research, several constitutive components have been identified. It is a gradual concept, with communicative competence underlying performance and being built up with practice and experience.

Hymes's juxtaposition of the word 'communicative' with 'competence' stood in sharp contrast at the time with Noam Chomsky's influential use of the term 'linguistic competence,' which Chomsky used to refer to a native speaker's implicit knowledge of the grammatical rules governing her/his language. Such knowledge, Chomsky argued, enables speakers to create new and grammatically correct sentences and accounts for the fact that speakers are able to recognize grammatically incorrect as well as correct sentences such as, in English *She book the read*. While accepting the importance of grammatical knowledge, Hymes argued that in order to communicate effectively, speakers had to know not only what was grammatically correct/incorrect, but what was communicatively appropriate in any given context. A speaker therefore must possess more than just grammatical knowledge; for example, a multilingual speaker in a multilingual context knows which language to use in which context and users of a language where there are both formal and informal forms of address know when to use which, such as *vous* (formal) and *tu* (informal) in French. Hymes famously stated that a child who produced language without due regard for the social context would be a monster (1974b: 75).

The emphasis that Hymes placed on appropriateness according to context, in his use of the term competence, challenged Chomsky's view about what exactly counts as knowledge of a language – knowledge of conventions of use in addition to knowledge of grammatical rules. In addition, and more fundamentally, Hymes problematized the dichotomy advanced by Chomsky between 'competence' and 'performance' and the related claim about what the study of linguistics proper should be. Chomsky's interest was in the universal psycholinguistics of language, the human capacity for generating the syntactic rules of language. His interest in knowledge, captured in his use of 'competence,' was therefore at an ideal or abstract level rather than in any actual knowledge that any one speaker or group of speakers might possess. For Chomsky, the focus of linguistics as a discipline should be on understanding and describing the general and abstract principles that make the human capacity for language possible. In contrast, 'performance' or actual utterances – that is, what people actually say and hear with all the errors, false starts, unfinished sentences – could add little to an understanding of the principles underlying language use and was therefore not deemed to be a relevant focus of linguistic study.

Hymes acknowledged the value of the more abstract and idealized approach that Chomsky advocated, not least because such a universalistic approach challenged any theories of language based on genetic differences or notions of racial hierarchy (Hymes, 1971: 4). However, he argued that there were other important dimensions to the study of language

that should not be so readily excluded from linguistics as a scientific field. Hymes's own interest in language was in large part driven by a concern for language questions arising in real life contexts, such as why children from economically advantaged and disadvantaged social backgrounds differ in the language they use. Chomsky's and Hymes's different aims for developing language theory are nowhere more clearly evident than in Hymes's comment on Chomsky's (1965: 3) now famous statement, on the purpose of linguistic theory: "Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly. . . ." Hymes (1971:4) comments: "The theoretical notion of the ideal speaker-listener is unilluminating from the standpoint of the children we seek to understand and to help."

Hymes was highly critical of a theory that explicitly set out to ignore the impact of social context on how language is used and hence the competence/performance dichotomy set up by Chomsky (echoing in some ways the *langue* and *parole* distinction made by Saussure, 1916). At a specific level, his key reasons for challenging such a dichotomy can be summarized as follows (based on Hymes, 1962/1968; 1971; 1974b):

- The dichotomy itself is problematic. It presupposes that knowledge can be understood without reference to use, yet analyzing actual use of language is key to exploring underlying principles for such use. Hymes argued that "performance data" should be considered a legitimate focus for linguistic study both in its own right and as data that reflects knowledge underlying any performance.
- The dichotomy is built on a series of abstractions: ideal speaker-listener, homogenous speech community, perfect knowledge of language.
- Chomsky's notion of speaker-listener does not acknowledge or account for the differences in reception competence and production competence evident in many contexts, as in children from some social backgrounds understanding formal school language yet not producing it.
- What counts as knowledge of language is reduced to only one aspect of knowledge, namely grammatical knowledge, when there are clearly other aspects to knowledge of language that are important, such as when to use which language, or varieties of languages, and in which contexts.
- Within an approach that focuses on competence as idealized knowledge, it is the abstract system of language that becomes the focus rather than speakers'/groups of speakers' use of language.
- Given the focus on knowledge as a set of abstract rules underlying use, actual use is relegated to only a marginal position in the scientific study of language. Hymes (1972a: 282) offers communicative competence as a more general and superordinate term to encompass the language capabilities of the individual that include both knowledge and use: "competence is dependent upon both (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use."

### **A Key Concept in an Emerging Sociolinguistic Tradition**

Emphasis on the notion of communicative competence formed part of Dell Hymes's call for a new field of study, the ethnography of communication, sometimes called the ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1962/1968; Gumperz and Hymes, 1972/1986). There are a number of concepts and categories presupposed by the notion of communicative competence, which continue to be highly influential in sociolinguistics and in many socially oriented approaches to study of language.

### **Sociocultural Context**

Given the importance attached to knowledge of the social conventions governing language use, understanding the context of language use is considered to be central. Exploring such context, that is, the cultural, historical, and social practices associated with the language use of any particular group or community of people, involves detailed descriptions and classification of language use organized around the following key questions. What are the communicative events, and their components, in a community? What are the relationships among them? What capabilities and status do they have, in general and in particular cases? How do they work? (Hymes, 1974b: 25).

### **Ethnography of Communication**

In order to explore how language is used in context, Hymes argued for an ethnographic approach to the study of communication or ways of speaking (Hymes, 1974a). This involves researchers setting out to systematically observe the activities of any given community, through immersing themselves in such activities and collecting a range of data,

such as recordings, field notes, and documentation. In this methodology both 'etic' and 'emic' approaches are considered important and complementary; the etic approach refers to observation from the outside as it were, that is, the researcher seeks to observe in detail the communicative activities – or speech events – of participants in a community; the emic involves exploring such events, from the inside, to determine how participants make sense of and understand such events and interactions. Ethnographers emphasize the importance of emic accounts to any theory of language; for example, only an emic perspective would enable a researcher to understand that a clap of thunder may in some cultural contexts be considered to be a communicative act (as in the case of the Ojibwa reported by Hymes, 1974b: 13), or that certain types of communication are permitted to men in some contexts while proscribed in others, such as the disciplining of children (as reported by Philipsen, 1975).

In an attempt to build a descriptive framework of how language is used in different contexts, Hymes, drawing on anthropologists such as Malinowski(1923, 1935), developed a series of categories to map out the relevant contextual aspects to language use, such as speech event and speech community.

### **Socialization**

People learn the rules of use through everyday interaction within speech communities. It is through such interaction that children acquire knowledge about appropriate language use, that is, communicative competence (Hymes, 1971: 10). Hymes indicates that socialization is not constituted by a rigid trajectory and suggests that both “a long and short range view of competency should be adopted” (1972a: 287). From his perspective, the short range view concerns innate capacities as they emerge in the first years of life, and the long range concerns continuing socialization through life. What this short/long range implies is that competence is not static. In some instances, quite drastic changes can be made to an individuals' competence as when a child whose home language variety is significantly different from the school variety. Of course, as Hymes emphasizes, such extensions or shifts in competence are not necessarily straightforward; there are plenty of opportunities for misunderstanding to occur when receivers/listeners accustomed to the language varieties of one community engage in communication with those from another.

### **Communicative Competence in Other Domains**

The notion of communicative competence has been highly influential in fields beyond linguistics, such as education, sociology, and psychology. In some instances the basic assumptions surrounding the term have been maintained, and in others extended or problematized. Probably nowhere has the impact of the notion been more powerful than in the teaching of languages, including the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. Whereas the emphasis in language teaching had been on grammatical and syntactic accuracy, following the work of Hymes and others (Gumperz and Hymes, 1972/1986), there was a significant turn towards communicative language teaching: this shift involved the teaching and learning of language considered to be appropriate to specific situations, based on what speakers actually use, rather than what they are presumed to use (Paulston, 1992). Assessment of language learning has been influenced accordingly, with a focus on students' capacity to communicate, rather than the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences (Hall and Eggington, 2000). The extent to which this more situational approach to second and foreign language teaching prevails is a matter of debate, but the impact of communicative competence is widely acknowledged (Firth and Wagner, 1997).

The use of the term has also been extended and modulated in other domains. For example, Culler (1975) developed the influential notion of literary competence to describe readers' knowledge of the conventions required in order to interpret literary texts. Academic communicative competence has been used to refer to knowledge of the conventions governing the use of language in academic communication (Berkenkotter et al., 1991). Both uses refer to knowledge of specific textual features, such as metaphor in the case of literary competence and argument in academic competence, as well as knowledge about what counts as specific text types or genres (academic, literary) in particular cultural contexts.

### **Re-examining Appropriateness**

The notion of appropriateness is central to communicative competence and central to the field of sociolinguistics whose empirical goal has been to explore patterns of language use, according to the norms of any given community. However, the use of such a notion has been critiqued by some because it serves to emphasize norms and underplay differences within any given community or communicative context.