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Language in Discourse

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Abstract

The argument presented in this paper attempts to awaken a discussion over competence viewed as a fundamental element of successful discourse. Since the image of both linguistic competence and communicative competence is somewhat narrowed being primarily focused on the knowledge of grammar, in the case of linguistic competence, and the ability to use this knowledge in the very act of communication (communicative competence), the present article tries to introduce a more developed image. As a result of the discussion, the model of creative communicative competence has been worked out and described in brief. The way in which the model is presented makes the reader aware of the network of competence related language elements which are involved in discourse, making it productive.

Keywords: *discourse, linguistics, competence, information channel, pragmatics, communication*

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł stara się rozbudzić dyskusję na temat kompetencji postrzeganej jako fundamentalny jej element decydujący o powodzeniu dyskursu. Z tej racji, iż pojęcie kompetencji lingwistycznej i pojęcie kompetencji komunikacyjnej wydaje się być zawężone do znajomości gramatyki, w przypadku kompetencji lingwistycznej, i umiejętności wykorzystania tej wiedzy w momencie tworzenia aktu komunikacji (tj. kompetencja komunikacyjna), niniejszy artykuł stara się przedstawić bardziej rozwinięty wizerunek kompetencji. W rezultacie ukazanej tu dyskusji, wypracowany został i opisany w zarysie model kreatywnej kompetencji komunikacyjnej. Sposób, w jaki model jest przedstawiony uświadamia odbiorcę o istnieniu siatki kompetencyjnej, stworzonej przez powiązane ze sobą elementy językowe, i decydującej o powodzeniu dyskursu.

Słowa kluczowe: *dyskurs, lingwistyka, kompetencja, kanał informacji, pragmatyka, komunikacja*

Introduction

The great Danish linguist – Otto Jespersen – on the very cusp of the 20th century, while lecturing at Columbia University, presented a unique image of language. The image, somewhat developed in *The Philosophy of Grammar* (Jespersen, 1963) has been for decades an indicator, revealing the true nature of language. According to Jespersen,

> "The essence of language is human activity – activity on the part of one individual to make himself understood by another, and activity on the part of that other to understand what was in the mind of the first. These two individuals, the producer and the recipient of language, or as we may more conveniently call them, the speaker and the hearer, and their relations to one another, should never be lost sight of if we want to understand the nature of language ..." (1963, p. 2).

It has always been clear to educators and researchers that language is a living organism attributed to its users. The living character of language is demonstrated by its diachronic and especially synchronic transformation at the very moment of communication between the producer and the recipient of language. In truth, since each individual human is different (even in the case of identical twins) it can be said that within one language community, two language users who use the same communication instrument, i.e. language, use it differently due to age and experience, social background, education or profession. Particularly the social background and cultural milieu are of paramount importance in language fostering of an individual and, in consequence, his expressiveness. The way language is used in communication testifies to the user's personality and shows what is in his mind. At this point it is reasonable to ask the following question: how do chunks of language come into existence in the mind of a speaker?

Language acquisition and language formation is an everlasting and never ending process. We are born with language abilities, grow up with language and, in consequence, develop it through the simple act of living in a community of language users. Whoever the language user is, he or she represents

a language community which is marked and therefore distinguished from another language community by the way the community members perceive their surroundings and express their thoughts. Whatever object is found in the surroundings, it must be given a name. Moreover, the community members' feelings, emotions, attitudes – all the abstract notions they come across – must also be labeled. All these names or labels are products of the mind. Your subjective perception of the world you live in is clearly reflected in and created by your mind tool – the tool which is shared with the community members you belong to. This sort of creation is omnipotent as the human mind has an unlimited power to create. Consequently, the language chunks we use for the sheer purpose of communication are just products of the mind. The mind becomes a matrix in which names for concrete objects and all sorts of labels for abstract ideas and notions originate and develop. The process of engraving all those concrete object names and abstract ideas follows at least two types of rule: the first being directly related to the logic of expressiveness and therefore, understanding and communication, and the second related to norms, tradition, and habits as well as common sense knowledge and values shared within the language user's community. Hence, all the norms and habits, functioning in a given community, are responsible for shaping and fostering the community's tool of communication; their communicative expressiveness is, in fact, the expressiveness of their way of thinking and acting. The whole process of language forging is a socio-cultural activity being an immanent part of the language community's development and intellectual growth. Hence, the community's development parallels the development of the communication instrument used by the community members. All their new experiences, gradually deepened knowledge, developed norms or habits are stored in the mental matrix of the mind. So, the qualities that are spread throughout a given ethnic or social group are stored in the minds of the group members. Therefore, the norms and rules functioning in such a group must be reflected in the tool of communication used by the people who constitute the group. Hence, it can be concluded that the behavior of the mind is fundamental to the origin and development of the human means of communication in any form it may appear.

Behavior of mind

Normally, we are used to carrying out analyses and talking about human behavior as different from that of animals'. In this sort of comparative analysis we usually concentrate our attention on physical aspects such as habit

formation, often making reference to the experiment with dogs by Pavlov (1955). Pavlov's fundamental form of behaviorism puts a stress on observable and measurable behavior and its peak achievement – habit formation. In this respect fundamental behaviorism is based largely on the stimulus/response pattern, which concludes that responses to stimuli can be easily applied and practiced to form habits in humans as well as animals. Hence, for decades in the 20th century, language development, both in children and adults, was viewed through the prism of behavioristic psychology and identified with automatization and habit formation as a result of training and practice not necessarily involving the power of mind. Fortunately, the turbulent years of the 1960's led to a strong reaction against this mechanistic treatment of language and its user and, instead, inclined towards Chomsky's point of view which stresses creativity as the main feature distinguishing human language from the language of animals. It became evident that the behavioristic approach cannot be applied in a universal way because:

> "There is nothing useful to be said about behavior or thought at the level of abstraction at which animal and human communication fall together. The examples of animal communication that have been examined to date do share many of the properties of human gestural systems, and it might be reasonable to explore the possibility of direct connection in this case. But human language, it appears, is based on entirely different principles. ... [...] ... As far as we know, possession of human language is associated with a specific type of mental organization, not simply a higher degree of intelligence". (Chomsky, 2007, p. 61).

Nevertheless, linguistic creativity, as viewed from the Chomskyan perspective, is perceived as a result of the speaker's knowledge of language rules. Chomsky stressed that

> "it was clearly understood that one of the qualities that all languages have is their 'creative' aspect. Thus an essential property of language is that it provides the means for expressing indefinitely many thoughts and for reacting appropriately in an indefinite range of new situations". (Chomsky, 1972, p. 6).

Although Chomsky and his followers underscore creativity as the essence of the speaker's performance and therefore language, their reference to the role of mind is indirect. In fact, Chomsky, in questioning behavioristic psychology, points to the role of language rules and their creative usage by

the speaker who demonstrates in this way his linguistic competence. However, too much focus on linguistic competence actually blurs the true image of the core element of knowledge formation and storage. It has to be said explicitly that the human mind becomes the heart of the matter as far as any kind of knowledge, including linguistic, is concerned. Undoubtedly, Chomsky speaks about the human mind as the organ responsible for human linguistic performance. However, it seems that the image of human linguistic activity as created by him deserves some expansion by making reference to behaviorism, the very term Chomsky might be cautious of using, nowadays. But this sort of behaviorism which is to be presented now is not simply one characteristic of its fundamental form based on stimulus, response and habit formation. This is the mental behaviorism attributed to human beings exclusively. In traditional behaviorism, habit formation was an immanent act of developing abilities either of people or animals. In this regard there is no substantial difference as far as the object of the behavioral treatment is concerned, no matter whether we treat an animal or a human being. By introducing the term mental behaviorism we explicitly differentiate animals and people as objects of behavioral treatment. Hence, the term behaviorism can be applied with regard to animals only, while the term mental behaviorism is the domain of human beings exclusively. This only relates to mental behaviorism that is characteristic of the psychological side of linguistic activity, which is entirely responsible for the nature and context of discourse.

The context of discourse is always complex as it comprises facts or circumstances that surround a situation or event directly related to the discourse subject matter. An array of facts different in nature or circumstances requires from the language user, especially a speaker, the knowledge of organizing communication in a precise form free from clumsiness. The speaker's previous experience in the subject matter, even accidental, may appear a great asset. This is so because the previous experience almost always leaves an imprint on the brain, which implies that the impulse coming out of the discourse related situation or fact provides a link with the brain, thus storing within it a matrix of the former experience. At this point the speaker may demonstrate the psychological side of linguistic activity by making use of his or her previously gained knowledge stored and decoded in the form of a matrix or frame. According to Minsky (1975), a frame is a data-structure for representing an experienced situation or event decoded in the brain. So, when a speaker finds himself or herself in circumstances similar to those already experienced, he or she selects from memory a structure (the so-called "frame"). Actually, this is a frame of remembrance enabling the speaker to

recall past occurrences and make them fit the new situation, if necessary. In this respect we experience the activation of brain functions and therefore, the mind's behavioral patterns.

Information channel

Inevitably, the brain activity in the case of discourse is detected on both sides – that of the message sender and that of the receiver's. These two discourse participants create the information channel in which the process of encoding, decoding, message forming, and feedback takes place. In the case of spoken language in use (direct contact between discourse participants) information is transmitted via a vocal-auditory channel created by the speaker and the listener. Apart from genuine information, the vocal-auditory channel is expanded by visible reactions of discourse participants effecting both the process of coding and decoding and in consequence – message forming and feedback. This process is also strengthened by suprasegmental features such as the pitch of voice, intonation, or the rate of sound production, as far as the spoken language is concerned, and by the affective sphere of communication usually related to style and register, figurative usage or mood, characteristic mainly of the written form. Hence, the information channel marks its presence both in the physical and affective sphere of communication. Moreover, the content of the channel is responsible for message interpretation and therefore, its understanding or misunderstanding. Apart from typically linguistic elements such as, for example grammar rules or lexis, the content of the channel needs to deal with the culture of the language user as

> "our understanding not only of conversational 'rules' and norms, but also our interpretation of meaning or individual words is coloured by our (generally unconscious) acceptance of certain cultural premises". (Hughes, 2002, p. 168).

The channel of information as presented in this discussion, cannot be viewed as an acoustic path only and thus compared with the acoustic channel present in animal language. Actually, in the case of human language exclusively, the channel of information is a double-track conduit where one track is acoustic and the other – affective. The channel operation essentially begins on the very first day we are born as communication starts with sound emission.

> "The emitted sounds gradually evolve, and as articulated units become elements of the mother tongue system; and not only at the beginning, but prior to the formation of their final articulated

forms do the sounds become 'oral gestures' – such as signals of warning or surprise; as such they also appear as quasi referential calls at the fully developed stage of human language. As 'oral gestures' which remain under the control of the cerebral cortex, language sounds become a medium for creative transmission and behavior". (Zygmunt, 2012, p. 710).

Hence, this is one more evidence that the behavior of mind is an immanent element of human communication. We must not forget that the behavior of mind is responsible for language creativity which is the very distinctive feature of human language only. One more feature is of significant importance, no matter whether we consider the spoken or written form of language. This is the intellectual contact which exists in human communication only, and thus in message reception either in the oral way – speaker/listener, or written – writer/reader.

Pragmatics

The intellectual contact in discourse, either spoken or written, is characteristic of the so called invisible meaning. The term "invisible meaning" refers to the language user's ability of demonstrating three major communication skills present in discourse, namely – the art of using language, changing language, and following the rules.

Despite the eye contact between interlocutors, the acoustic channel created by them is filled with language sounds only. However, what effects conversation and its outcome is not only the meaningful sound of language; in many cases, the interlocutors support their oral messages with gestures, facial expressions, or pauses which often demand guesswork in order to attain the intended meaning. However, such guesswork is not always correct. Anyway, the direct contact between two or more interlocutors appears not to be sufficient for a fruitful act of communication and the understanding of the point of discourse. As a matter of fact, what guarantees successful communication is the intellectual contact between the people involved in conversation. The same kind of contact is also indispensable in written discourse where absence of the acoustic channel and direct contact makes the very act of message sending and receiving even more demanding. Therefore, the acoustic channel present in spoken language is substituted by the intellectual and inconspicuous contact between the sender of a message and its receiver.
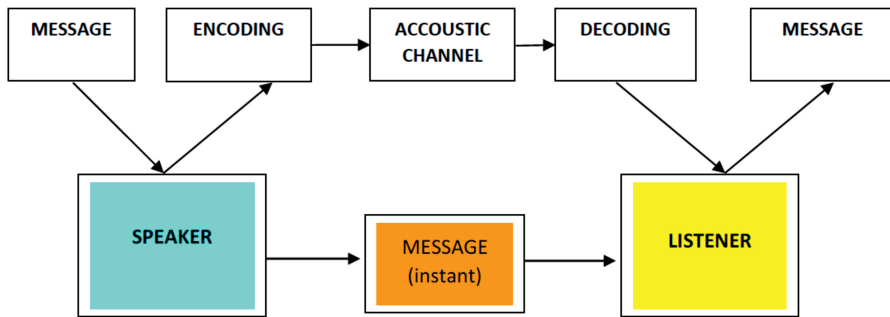
Figure 1: Communication in spoken language

The figure above in comparison to the figure below clearly shows the difference in communication through spoken and written language.
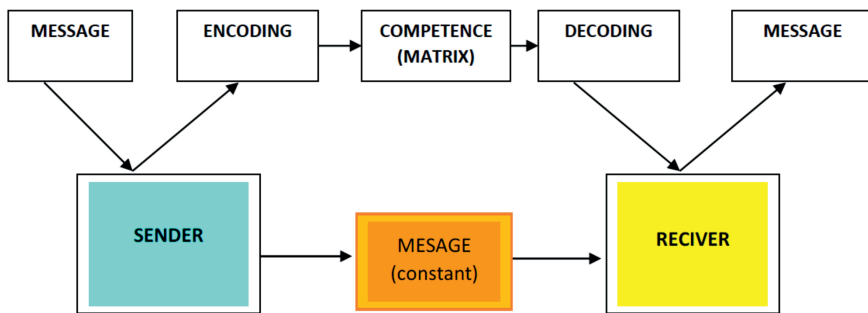

Figure 2: Communication in written language

Seemingly, the difference in the use of two forms of language, i.e. spoken and written, refers only to the type of channel and contact in operation. As a matter of fact, the difference, analyzed from the point of view of pragmatics, appears to be far deeper; primarily, it can be seen and studied at the level of interaction – direct (Fig. 1) or indirect (Fig.2). Hence, it is interaction, especially its type, which has much to do with the understanding of language in discourse. Presence or absence of a direct contact, contextual factors or even psychological factors referring to the mood of discourse participants influence the meaning of a message coded and decoded either orally or graphically. Moreover, instant reactions or gestures in the case of the words uttered as well as environment and responsibility for the words written – all leave their hallmark on the message. Inevitably, the psychological side of both linguistic and intellectual activity is present in discourse.

Essence of discourse

Analyzing discourse we have to be aware of its various types, depending on the discourse community involved. Apart from the universal discourse type, applicable to all members of a language community and characteristic of its general and common features of discussion or negotiation over everyday issues, some other types can be distinguished such as political or religious discourse as well as medical, legal or business discourse which involve groups of people who share special registers and create spoken or written texts in which these registers appear.

Since everyday experience teaches us that the universal discourse type is most common among language communities and covers both formal and informal use of language, even a brief presentation of this type might be sufficient to show its nature. On an everyday basis, at home, school, college, or in the office we come across a variety of discourse modes such as description, narration, argumentation, persuasion or exposition. Besides, on an everyday basis we create texts of various natures: essays, reports, journals, stories or even poems or any other kind of language production. The language production of the producer is addressed to the recipient of the product, automatically establishing invisible (psychological) or visible (physical) relations between them. They are able to communicate due to the shared code and register. It has been noticed that code and register are strongly dependent on social conventions or culture of the language users in question. The appropriateness of their coding and decoding is the result of their competence and ability to use language in a social context. Moreover, the language users' complex knowledge and experience combined is a must for successful communication and proper discourse interaction. Apart from experience, of paramount importance to discourse construction is the language users' competence in the sphere of language and culture, especially their knowledge pertaining to the surroundings and social contexts encompassing a variety of events of a different nature.

> "Persons who understand real events or speech events are able to construct a mental representation, and especially a meaningful representation, only if they have more general knowledge about such events". (van Dijk et al. 1983, p. 6).

Understanding situations or social contexts means, according to van Dijk:

> "that the person uses or constructs information about the relationship between the events and their situations. That is, the un-

derstander now has three kinds of data, namely, information from the events themselves, information from the situation or context, and information from the cognitive presuppositions. This information may be combined in an effective way, such that a mental representation of the event is constructed as soon as possible and as well (as meaningfully, usefully, etc.) as possible". (van Dijk et al. 1983, p. 6-7).

Consequently, in order to understand fully a message evolved in discourse, it is inevitable to function socially and mentally. Therefore, the 'understander', as van Dijk calls the language user, in order to function effectively in a discourse has to behave physically, reacting to situations and events, and also mentally, demonstrating an array of competence.

Discourse competence

Discourse competence combines in its widest possible representation both the competence image as presented by Chomsky (1965) and that of Hymes' (1970). Now, its core element which is of linguistic nature is strengthened by the language user's knowledge of social and cultural norms being manifested at the very moment of communication. Additionally, a neatly organized form of communication can be also developed due to the use of matrixes or schemata stored in the user's mind (cf. Minsky, 1975; Bartlett, 1932). These are ruminations of the language user's past experience. Hence, experience, having much to do with the fostering of empirical competence, becomes a vital element of knowledge. Nevertheless such schemata or frames imprinted in the mind are subject to critical reflection and reframing, which comes with time and the enriched experience. Moreover,

"Critical reflection is most effective if it occurs not only on an individual plane but also in reflective discourse with co-learners – in an inter-subjective conversation whose purpose is to evaluate habitual perspectives on different phenomena in light of alternative interpretations". (Gedžūne, 2015, p. 96).

Hence, in order to be able to interpret and evaluate the outcomes of inter-subjective and multi-purpose conversations, creative communicative competence becomes necessity and requires that the language user's knowledge be effective at least in the competence areas presented in the model below (Fig. 3).
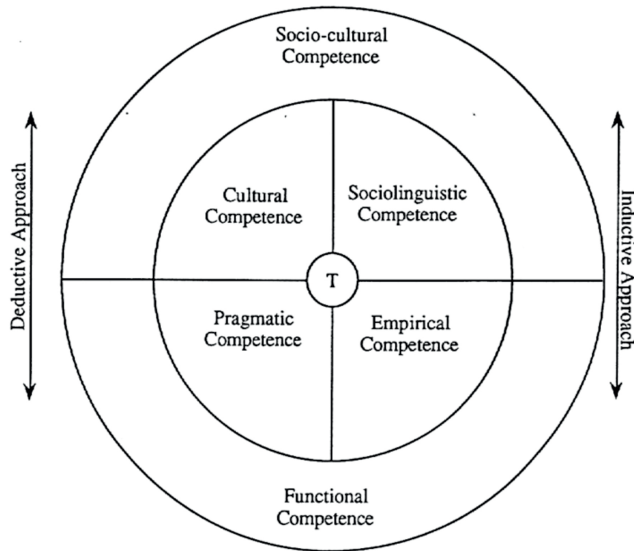
Model of Creative Communicative Competence

T – target linguistic knowledge

Figure 3: Competence – essentials of communication

Even a brief analysis of communication covering both the spheres of spoken and written language (see Figures 1 and 2) illustrates the difference between them. It becomes apparent that in spoken language a great responsibility of message clearness and understanding relies on the acoustic channel while in the case of written language it is competence in its multiple forms which assures comprehension. At this point, one may draw a false conclusion that competence in its multiple forms is not needed to exchange information orally as the acoustic channel suffices. To make the case clear immediately, it has to be stressed that competence is omnipotent in coding and decoding any information in any form of language: spoken or written. It is competence which guarantees successful communication and becomes conditio sine qua non of discourse fulfillment. Hence, it would be advisable to know what component parts are decisive in turning competence into a workable and effective communicative tool. As discussed earlier and presented above, some component parts are of social or cultural nature, some others derive from experience. Nevertheless, the true nature of communicative competence, especially the kind which is essential in discourse, still remains obscure. Generally, competence is perceived as knowledge. However, this immediately

raises the question – what sort of knowledge? Out of many definitions one in particular deserves attention, for it claims that competence is

> "the quality or state of being functionally adequate or of having sufficient knowledge, judgment, skill, or strength (as for a particular duty or in a particular respect) [also] range of ability or capability". (Webster's, 1993, p. 463).

It is almost certain that the core element of the above-presented definition is embedded in the phrase "functionally adequate". Therefore, the language user's competence cannot be complete if it does not cover the knowledge of language macro-functions, such as expressive (for example, to read and understand poetry), regulatory (to instruct people), interpersonal (for socializing), representational (for example, to inform) or instrumental (to cause some events to happen), interactional (to keep channels of communication open), and heuristic (for example, to acquire knowledge and learn about the environment) (cf. Halliday, 1973). Without a doubt, the knowledge of language functions makes language users fulfil their tasks globally and locally; on one occasion, a language user can be responsive, responding to the language of a counterpart, and on another – assertive, demanding responses from his or her interlocutor (cf. Wadensjö, 1998). Nevertheless, two language users involved in interaction have to stick to the language paradigm, style and standard and thus – demonstrate their socio-cultural competence, pertaining to the knowledge of register and social norms of the language community as well as functional competence derived from language experience and pragmatism. Only then, can interaction be viewed as successful and creative, when it contributes simultaneously to the deepening of knowledge already possessed by the two interlocutors.

The above presented model (Fig. 3) attempts to visualize the notion of competence, whilst leaving also a trait of creativity. It is often believed that to succeed in communication (that is to reach the "target" marked as "T" in the model) a discourse participant is expected to demonstrate, first of all, superb linguistic competence. Nevertheless, linguistic competence, although fundamental, does not always allow for creativity and thus, successful functioning in discourse. From the above-developed discussion it comes out that two competence spheres, socio-cultural and functional, are mainly responsible for the quality of discourse language. This opinion finds, to some extent, support in the point of view displayed by Sambor Grucza (2008) who distinguishes inter-cultural competence and discursive competence which allow language users to take part in interaction via dialog, discourse, polemic or treaty, and make them function locally and globally due to their highly

developed competence in multiple forms. Such forms, although labeled differently, can be found in the Model of Creative Communicative Competence (Fig. 3) as its component parts. Moreover, the model somehow resembles what Hausendorf and Quasthoff (in Grucza, 2008) call "discourse acquisition support system" which can be easily introduced to language learners either inductively or deductively. Therefore, creative communicative competence can be developed in the course of the teaching/learning process focused on discourse analysis and organized by professionals, guiding students with strategies-based instruction (cf. Brown, 2001; Johnson, 2008).

Conclusions

A thorough manifestation of language competence appears in discourse. Now, the term "language competence" is used here on purpose in order not to identify it with "linguistic competence" as used in the Chomskyan sense. Neither should it be identified with the term introduced by Hymes, that of "communicative competence". Both "linguistic competence" and "communicative competence" seem to underscore the static nature of language, its passiveness that is knowledge about language and the knowledge needed to use language. Since language is a living organism which is affected by changes both diachronically and synchronically, it is advisable to expand the notion of language by adding to its image a dynamic element, pointing to creativity of the language user and stressing, at the same time, his or her individual competence and the readiness to use it assertively. In consequence, the term "creative communicative competence" has been suggested here to direct the reader's attention to what is the essence of language competence – i.e. creativity. Since language formation is an everlasting and never ending process, creative communicative competence must undergo developmental changes. Hence, it is strongly believed that a highly developed creative communicative competence can be instrumental in working out strategic competence, which is a peak achievement of the process of communication and discourse. Moreover, it is also believed that strategic competence cannot be properly developed without the prior development of creative communicative competence. This is so because strategic competence enables language users to avoid or compensate for breakdowns in communication, especially when they remain abruptly stuck in conversation. Due to their knowledge, language users keep being creative and maintain the process of communication with regard to the discourse situation, language form (spoken or written), genre, language variety, and finally – the purpose of discourse.

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