Hymes: Communicative Competence

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In modern linguistic studies, “[i]t takes the absence of a place for sociocultural factors, and the linking of performance to imperfection, to disclose an ideological aspect to the theoretical standpoint. It is, if I may say so, rather a Garden of Eden view." (Hymes 1971, 272)
• **Modern (formal) linguistic theory** is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener.

• Acquisition of linguistic **competence** is believed to be independent of sociocultural features.

• **Performance** has a notion of sociocultural content, but is primarily concerned with psychology rather than interaction.

• **Structure** is taken as the “primary end in itself” (1971, 272).

• Negative notion of **primary linguistic data**.
“The controlling image is of an abstract, isolated individual, almost an unmotivated cognitive mechanism, not, except incidentally, a person in a social world.” (1971, 272)
Need for a linguistic theory

– That is motivated by practical needs;
– In which sociocultural factors have an explicit and consecutive role;
– That is broader;
– That integrates relationships between the use of language and social components.
“Social life has affected not merely outward performance, but inner competence itself.” (1971, 274)
• Linguists need “to transcend their notions of perfect competence, homogeneous speech community, and independence of sociocultural features.” (1971, 274)

• Within speech communities (of, for example, English) there are diverse and different levels of competence.

• Behavior attaches to grammar.

• Judgments and responses of members of the studied speech community must be considered.

• Analyzing diversity can isolate homogeneity.
What is required is a theory that “can deal with a heterogeneous speech community, differential competence, the constitutive role of sociocultural features – that can take into account […] socioeconomic differences, multilingual mastery, relativity of competence […], expressive values, socially determined perception, contextual styles and shared norms for the evaluation of variables.” (1971, 277)
• Normally, a child does not only acquire grammatical, but also appropriate language.

• Internalization of attitudes towards language is as important as the use of language itself.

• Therefore, a model of language must be valid in “communicative conduct and social life.”

• Grammatically identical sentences may be diverse in meaning, aim, etc.

• Grammatically diverse sentences may have the same meaning, aim, etc.
“The acquisition of competence for use, indeed, can be stated in the same terms as acquisition of competence for grammar.” (1971, 279)
• A re-definition of the linguistic notions of competence and performance is necessary.

• Linguistic competence does not include sociocultural aspects.

• The concept of performance leaves little room for sociocultural interests.

• Different meanings of performance:
  – (underlying) competence vs. (actual) performance;
  – (underlying) grammatical competence vs. (underlying) models/rules of performance.
“It remains that the present vision of generative grammar extends only a little way into the realm of the use of language. To grasp the intuitions and data pertinent to underlying competence for use requires a sociocultural standpoint. To develop that standpoint adequately, one must transcend the present formulation of the dichotomy of competence: performance, as we have seen, and the associated formulation of the judgments and abilities of the users of a language as well.” (1971, 281)
In order to be adequate, a linguistic theory must pay attention not to two (competence and performance), but to four judgments:

1. Whether something is **formally possible**;

2. Whether something is **feasible** by virtue of the means of implementation available;

3. Whether something is **appropriate** in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;

4. Whether something is **in fact done, actually performed**, and what its doing entails.

A speaker who fulfills all four aspects is **competent**.
1. Formal Possibility

“[...] Something possible within a formal system is grammatical, cultural, or, on occasion, communicative.”
2. Feasibility

- Predominant concern: psycholinguistic factors.
- When adding a cultural level, features of the body and of the material environment must be considered as well.
3. Appropriateness

- “Sense of relating to contextual features” 
  (1971,285)
- Tacit knowledge must be employed.
4. Actual Performance

- **Occurrence** cannot be left out!
- Something may be possible, feasible, and appropriate, but may never occur.
• Short vs. long term view on competency:
  – A short term view focusses on innate capacities that develop in the earliest phase of human life;
  – A long term view also takes the continuing socialisation and lifelong change of competence into account.
• Furthermore, the competence can be altered.
• Sociolinguistic (communicative) interference:
  – Different sociolinguistic systems can interfere;
  – Interference might cause problems.
• Differences between systems must be known in order to create a functionally motivated theory.
“[T]he capacities of persons, the organization of verbal means for socially defined purposes, and the sensitivity of rules to situations” is what needs to be attended to. (1971, 292)