

On Verbal Competence

Zhongxin Dai*, Haiyan Li*

ARTICLE INFO

Available Online March 2014

Key words:

verbal competence;
intentional notion;
meaning image;
verbal expression.

ABSTRACT

This paper explored a new concept, *verbal competence*, to present a challenge to Chomsky's *linguistic competence* and Hymes' *communicative competence*. It is generally acknowledged that Chomsky concerned himself only with the syntactic/grammatical structures, and viewed the speaker's generation and transformation of syntactic structures as the production of language. Hymes challenged Chomsky's conception of linguistic competence and argued for an ethnographic or sociolinguistic concept, *communicative competence*, but his concept is too broad to be adequately grasped and followed in such fields as linguistics and second language acquisition. *Communicative competence* can include abilities to communicate with nonverbal behaviors, e.g. gestures, postures or even silence. The concept of *verbal competence* concerns itself with the mental and psychological processes of verbal production in communication. These processes originate from the speaker's personal experience, in a certain situation of human communication, and with the sudden appearance of the *intentional notion*, shape up as the *meaning images* and end up in the *verbal expression*.

1. Introduction

Towards the end of the 1950s, Chomsky (1959, 1965) challenged Skinner's (1957) theory of verbal behavior, and in a few years of time formulated his own theory of *linguistic competence*, which is paired with *linguistic performance*. It is generally acknowledged that Chomsky concerned himself only with the syntactic/grammatical structures, and viewed the speaker's generation and transformation of syntactic structures as the production of language. Hymes challenged Chomsky's conception of linguistic competence and argued for an ethnographic or sociolinguistic concept, *communicative competence*, but his concept is too broad to be adequately grasped and followed in such fields as linguistics and second language acquisition. *Communicative competence* can include abilities to communicate with nonverbal behaviors, e.g. gestures, postures or even silence. This paper attempts to explore the concept of *verbal competence*, which concerns itself with the mental and psychological processes of verbal production in communication. These processes originate from the speaker's personal experience, in a certain situation of human communication, and with the sudden appearance of the *intentional notion*, shape up as the *meaning images* and end up in the *verbal expression*.

2. Chomsky's Linguistic Competence

According to Chomsky's (1965) own definition, *linguistic competence* refers to the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language. Linguistic performance refers to the way a native speaker actually uses the language system. Linguistic competence is the knowledge of ideal native speakers' language system that enables them to produce and interpret an infinite number of sentences in their language, and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical ones. This knowledge of the native speakers' language system is characterized by being intuitive, creative and productive. Native speakers are able to intuitively judge whether a sentence is grammatically correct or not, and they can creatively produce an infinite number of grammatically correct sentences, including novel ones, with a limited set of grammatical rules.

* College of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

Chomsky is often mistaken when he claims that human linguistic competence is innate. When he discusses linguistic competence, he goes beyond the actual linguistic performance of manipulating the rules of a particular grammar, but to the capacity of acquiring and manipulating rules of grammar of any human language. He observes that although both humans and other animals have the ability to conduct inductive reasoning only humans can develop the ability to acquire a set of grammatical rules from their experience of the exposure to a language in its actual use. Other animals have never demonstrated any sign of the ability to understand and produce a human language no matter how they are taught the language. Chomsky labeled this underlying mechanism relevant to learning human language as the language acquisition device (LAD). He claimed that the task of linguists is to determine what constraints of the LAD impose on the acquisition of human language.

Therefore, for Chomsky, linguistic competence is, on the one hand, innate and, on the other hand, abstract in the sense that it refers only to the syntactic structures of human language, which is disentangled from the idea that the speaker intends to express, and can be actualized in any real language, such as English. As early as in 1957, when *Syntactic Structures* was published, Chomsky developed the idea of two levels of sentence representation: a deep structure and a surface structure. The deep structure represents the semantic relations of a sentence. Before a speaker utters anything, he first has these semantic relations and then realizes them via transformation and generates the surface structure of these semantic relations via phonological forms of the sentence. In Chomsky's theory, semantic relations are the very starting point of his Transformational-Generative Grammar, but the word "semantic" is used to modify "relations", not to denote the real idea that a speaker intends to communicate. He concerns himself merely with the syntactical, grammatical, or logical relations between the parts of sentences, and never with relations of meaning involved in the sentences the native speakers actually produced in real situations of communication. In Chomsky's discussion, he has never showed any interest in human's real language communication. It was Hymes (1972) who took the communication issue as his main concern.

3. Hymes' Communicative Competence

The term *communicative competence* was coined by Hymes (1972), in response to the concept of *linguistic competence* by Chomsky. It refers to a language speaker's knowledge about both the language itself and social appropriateness of his utterance. In order to address Chomsky's inadequate conception of linguistic competence, Hymes argued for a broader term which includes much more than the pure syntactic knowledge of a native speaker. He imagined the whole picture of real communication and the speaker's ability to successfully and appropriately communicate with others in a real situation. Ever since the advent of Hymes' concept, the ethnographic and pragmatic aspects of language use have begun to be more salient in the studies of language communication. It should be noted that the concept of communicative competence is not just broader than linguistic competence, but broader than verbal communicative competence (since communication can include nonverbal communication). Our interest in this paper will focus on verbal communicative competence.

In a real situation, when we have something to communicate with people, we have to judge the situation and the person we intend to address, what to say and when and how to say it. Therefore, the competence involved in a real situation of verbal communication should include the actual use of the language for the purpose of communication. The actual operation of the verbal communicative competence should be something like this: a person with a certain idea to communicate with someone, for instance, to borrow some money to buy a car, will have to take into account who he will turn to for help, when he should go to him, and how he should word his idea. In an actual situation, he might go to the wrong person, or the right person in a wrong time, or the right person in a right time but with inappropriate language. When we scrutinize the process of the idea expression, we shall notice that there are different ways to express the same idea. The person can speak to the target listener directly, or indirectly by hinting that he needs to borrow some money to buy a car.

Frankly speaking, Hymes's conception of communicative competence is not adequate in terms of academic discussion of the language capability involved in the process of communication. It is too broad a term to focus on the language phenomenon. And, in contrast, Chomsky's linguistic competence is too narrow to claim everything linguistic in communication. In order to address this issue, we need to introduce another term "verbal competence," which refers to the ability to use a language in communication with people.

4. Verbal Competence

The term *verbal competence* presupposes the social process of communication between people, and the intelligence involved in the stage before the actual process of speaking. In the following, we shall discuss the factors involved in verbal competence and the operation of these factors.

4.1 Intentional Notion

As was mentioned above, human verbal communication differs from human behavioral communication in that language is the main involvement in verbal communication and participators use language to communicate their ideas or feelings. Whatever is said or written in communication, it is said or written about *something*. The *something* is there in the speaker's mind expecting him to verbalize, that is, to find language to convey. Verbal communication starts from this *something* in the mind intended to be expressed. We call it *intentional notion*. In a certain situation of communication, we first develop this intentional notion to communicate with other people, and then we come to the problem of how to say it and do the actual saying. For instance, if you want to inform all the people at a meeting that the time for the discussion session has been changed, you can put up a notice or send a message to all of them by email or telephone. The intention to inform all the people at the meeting of the time change of the discussion session is the direct cause of your actual behavior. However, if you are to put the message into words, or tell them the message, you will have to keep the notion in your mind that you intend to express while you are expressing it. You can word the notion in any language. Hence the notion is not constrained by language. In short, the process of verbal production consists mainly of two stages: the popping-up of the intentional notion in the context of communication and the actual wording of the notion.

The intentional notion is the very idea or feeling that you intend to get across to the listener, but it is not yet verbalized. It is a notion that the speaker intends to convey. This is why it is called *intentional notion*. The intentional notion is nonverbal by nature, and can be verbalized in different ways. For instance, if you want the listener to hand you a book on a desk, you can say "the book with a yellow cover" or "the book on the left side of your desk" or "the book near the dictionary". You can use "Can you hand me the book with a yellow cover?" or "Can you get me the book near the dictionary?" or "Can I have a look at the book beside the dictionary?" or "Give me the book there. What is it about?" Apparently you actually have many ways to express the same intentional notion. However, no matter what you say, your notion remains there, suspending in your mind, as it were, for you to seek possible expressions to convey it to the listener. In this particular case, the central notion is "I want you (the listener) to hand me the book." Actually, this central notion can be divided into two sub-notions. One is that you want the listener to hand you the book, and the other is the indication of the book, as in the situation of communication the book needs to be specified. We cannot say that different versions of the expression of the intentional notion are syntactically or semantically the same. They are certainly not. Without any situation, *the book near the dictionary* and *the book with a yellow cover* are not the same in meaning, but they can refer to the same book in a certain situation. Therefore, we need a term to discuss this phenomenon in the study of verbal communication. Without a context, *the book near the dictionary* refers to a relation between *a book* and *a dictionary*. Everyone who knows English can form the idea of a book or a dictionary even though the actual images of the book or the dictionary might be different. "*The book with a yellow cover*" indicates a book that has a yellow cover. The image that one develops from this expression is different from the image that he develops from "*the book near the dictionary*." From the above discussion, we can see that the intentional notion cannot possibly be directly conveyed to the listener. It needs images to construe the notion, and verbal expressions to convey the images. Therefore, we invent a term *meaning image* to indicate the interface between the intentional notion and verbal expression.

One intentional notion is intentionally, semantically, contextually and communicatively construed with meaning images, which can in turn be verbalized with different verbal expressions in the same language or in different languages. No matter how the intentional notion is construed, with this meaning image or another, it remains the same in the speaker's mind. But meaning images can also be construed syntactically rather than semantically. For instance, *the book with a yellow cover* can be worded as *the book that/which has a yellow cover* or *the yellow-covered book*.

Simply put, the intentional notion is the speaker's communicative mentality, intentionality or consciousness at the time when he tries to convey what he intends to get across to the listener. At this time and place, the being of the notion can be construed in different ways through meaning images. Different meaning images

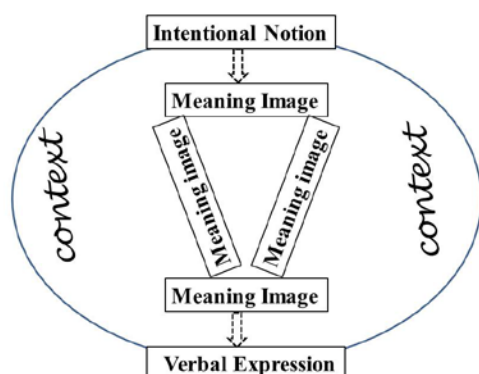
can indicate the same thing because the images are different facets of the same thing. Only in a certain situation, the situation of the co-being of the *dictionary* and the *book with a yellow cover*, can we put a semantic equation mark between *the book near the dictionary* and *the book with a yellow cover*.

4.2 Context and Meaning Image

Communication usually occurs in a context. A context is a situation where people share some information when they communicate with each other. If the speaker does not share the same information with the listener, the latter might be at a loss as to what the speaker is saying. Just imagine that there is no book near the dictionary or the book near the dictionary does not have a yellow cover. A book in a real context has many facets when construed from different view points. The book in that situation has a *yellow cover*, and is *near the dictionary*. It is also *on the left side of the desk*, it is *thick*, it is *about history*, and it is *beside the dictionary*. This is the context of a real situation when the communication occurs. Sometimes people do not share the context in here and now, but they are still communicating in the same context. For instance, you went to another place few days ago and now you are phoning someone at home and telling him to find the book about history on your desk. The context in your mind that you are describing to your friend is the then place when you left, but you are sharing it with your friend who is present in the place. They are the same place of different times.

Even though the intentional notion of the book is the same, the facets of the book being described are different. Each description is meaningful. *The book with a yellow cover IS the book about history* in this particular situation or context. It cannot possibly mean the book about history in any other situation except this one. Anyone who hear or read *the book with yellow cover* can imagine a book with a yellow cover, even though the size or appearance of the book might be different. According to Evans (2009), this imagination of the book with a yellow cover comes from people's personal experience, rather than from the real situation of the speaker and listener. The phrase *the book with a yellow cover* conjures up different meaning images in different people who hear or read it. The phrase comes from a real situation of verbal communication because the book is the focus in the intentional notion and both the speaker and the listener are in the same context. But when we hear or read a sentence with *the book with a yellow cover* without being in the real situation, we can only form meaning images from our personal experience. The speaker's experience with *the book with a yellow cover* is real and therefore he can add more real information to the book. For instance, *the history book that John borrowed from our English teacher*, or *the book that our teacher discussed in the history class*, or more. Verbal communication in the real sense is communication between people in a real situation. Heidegger (1996) uses the word *Dasein* to refer to the speaker involved in real interaction with outside world, who is sharing the here-and-now world with the listener.

So far we have discussed the speaker's intentional notion, how it is construed through different images in the context and how images are expressed with verbal expressions. The following picture may clearly illustrate their relations:



4.3 Verbal Expression

Verbal competence refers to the ability to express the meaning images of the intentional notion. The verbalization, or verbal expression, of a meaning image depends not only on the relations of the components of the intentional notion, but also on the conventions of a particular language. The conventions include everything relevant to the so-called traditional grammar, metaphorical images and cultural images of various kinds.

In the evolution or development of a language, the verbalization of meaning images has been a long and slow process. Various images are used in the verbal expression of meaning images of intentional notions. For instance, Chinese is characterized by its idioms derived from cultural traditions of various kinds. Just take one example *Jianglang cai jin*. According to the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (Chinese English Edition)*, this idiom comes from a legend. Jiang Yan of the Southern Dynasties showed brilliance as a poet at an early age and became widely known as Prodigy Jiang, but he produced nothing of note in his later years. Thus “Prodigy Jiang used up his literary talent” becomes a set phrase to mean “at the end of one’s resources.” Whenever we see someone racking his brain for fresh ideas or apt expressions, usually when writing a poem or an essay, we can employ this meaning image of *Jianglang cai jin* to describe him. The intentional notion of describing someone who is at the end of his resources is realized by the verbalization of the meaning image of *Jianglang cai jin*.

Besides cultural images, language is characterized by metaphorical images. For instance, “window” means a space in the wall of a building or in the side of a vehicle, through which light can come in and people inside can see out. This meaning image enables people to transfer it to other meaning images. For example, *eyes are the windows of the mind*. Our knowledge of the outside world mainly comes from our eyes. Eyes serve as something like a window through which our mind can reach the outside world. In a similar way, we can say *television provides us with a useful window on the world*. Television is something that makes it possible for us to see and learn about what is happening in other parts of the world, so it is like a window. In Chinese, a unit or industry can often be referred to as a window. If a unit is a *window unit*, it is a service-rendering unit, meaning that the unit directly provides services to the masses or to foreigners, and that from their services the masses will shape their images of the government or the Party and the foreigners will know China.

The verbalization of meaning images entails linguistic conventions. For instance, the verbalization of the image “my sister bought an old car from John.” In English “my” in “my sister” has something to do with “me” or “I”, but here the possessive form should be used. In another language, “my sister” might be one word, or three words by adding a word between “I” and “sister,” or simple two words by putting “I” and “sister” together without changing the form of “I”. In English, “bought” means the action of “buy” that happens in the past, and it is used together with “from”.

It is evident that the verbalization of meaning images is done through the conventions of a particular language. By language convention we mean that the meaning images are socially and culturally construed. The evolution of a human language was originally directed towards the expression of the meaning image which is manipulated and directed by the intentional notion of the speaker in a real situation of communication. Individuals’ native language acquisition was also originally directed towards the expression of the meaning image under the intentional notion. The only difference is that native language learners are born in a situation where the community already has a language. They have no choice but to accept the convention or tradition of the expression of the meaning images. The language convention includes (1) the fragmentation of meaning images through symbolization of the components the meaning images with vocal sign forms of various kinds, (2) syntactic or semantic rules to indicate the relations among the components in the meaning images, and (3) logical and contextual traditions.

For instance, the meaning image of *my sister bought an old car from John* is the meaning that the intentional notion seeks to express. The intentional notion comes from the speaker’s experience, the meaning image from the intentional notion, and the verbal expression from the meaning image. In a certain situation of communication, say, the speaker has told the listener that his sister bought an old car, but did not know from whom she bought the car. Later the speaker learned that his sister bought it from John, a person both the speaker and the listener knew. Then the speaker saw the listener again and wanted to share the information with the listener: “My sister bought the old car from John.” The speaker used “the old car” instead of “an old car” as this information had been mentioned earlier, and stressed “John” as this was the new information that he wanted to emphasize. The conversation that they had had constituted the situation or context when they met again, and the speaker’s intention to share this information with the listener came from his prior experience of the conversation. Without this prior experience, the speaker would never have had the intention to communicate this information with the listener. Hence the intentional notion comes from the speaker’s prior experience. This intentional notion immediately gives rise to the meaning image of “his sister,” “the old car,” “buy,” and “John.” If an incompetent speaker speaks in broken English, “my,” “sister,” “car,” “buy,” “from John,” then a competent listener will be able to understand the speaker, since with these words the listener can form a meaning image and understand the speaker’s intentional notion. Hence the verbal

expression derives from the meaning image. What the speaker needs to do in order to become competent is to learn the conventions of the English language. First of all he has to learn to put the components of the images in a conventional order. In English the conventional order should be "my sister," "buy," "the old car," "from John;" in Japanese, "my sister," "from John," "the old car," "buy;" but in Chinese, "my sister," "from John," "buy," "the old car." Secondly, the speaker has to be equipped with other rules of the English language, in this case, the change of the verb "buy" to "bought" to indicate the past action.

5. Conclusion

This concept of verbal competence is superior to Chomsky's linguistic competence or Hymes' communicative competence in the following respects. The conception of the verbal competence is based on verbal production in the real situation of communication. It attempts to explore the mechanisms of verbal expression of the speaker's communicative idea from the very beginning point of communication to the end point of verbal forms. Therefore, unlike Chomsky's investigation of an ideal native speaker's linguistic competence of the skeleton of syntactic structures, the conception of verbal competence put the mechanisms of Chomsky's linguistic competence, i.e. grammatical competence, in the formation and development of the intentional notion, the meaning image and the verbal expression of the meaning image. Hymes' concept of the communicative competence is broader than our verbal competence, as it includes not only nonverbal communication, but also the social judgment of appropriateness of verbal communication. No matter whether the speaker's language is appropriate in a certain social situation of communication, it is the product of the speaker's mechanisms of verbal competence, i.e. the verbal expression of the speaker's intentional notion and meaning image.

References

- Chomsky, N (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Boston, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic structures*. The Hague: Mouton & Co. N.V., Publishers.
- Chomsky, N. (1959). A review of B. F. Skinner's "Verbal Behavior". *Language*, 35, 26-58.
- Evans, V. (2009). *How Words Mean: Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models and Meaning Construction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and Time*, translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hymes, D. H. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride, and J. Holmes (eds.), *Sociolinguistics*, 269-293. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Skinner, B. F. (1957). *Verbal Behavior*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.