

# COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES IN INTERLANGUAGE

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## Abstract

The concept 'communicative competence' covers four main aspects: grammatical competence traditionally dealing with syntax; sociolinguistic competence dealing with social appropriateness of communication; discourse competence dealing with cohesive and coherence in discourse; and strategic competence focusing on pragmatic function of communication. Those aspects of communicative competence have received great attention in language and literacy education, particularly in second language learning. However, little attention is given to the ability to employ different tactics by language users in achieving this goal. This paper examines this neglected area of communicative strategic competence and their implications for research and teaching.

**Keywords : communicative strategies, competence, interlanguage**

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is simply defined as a process in which a message is sent from senders to receivers. In a technical description, it is said that the sender encodes a message and the receiver decodes it. Communication problems occur when the encoded message differs from the decoded message. In other words, the message sent is not the message received. The development of sociolinguistics has shifted the attention of research from the nature of the mechanistic aspect of transmission to the significance of communication in its social context. Thus, instead of treating grammatical knowledge as primary in communication, sociolinguistics focuses on social determinants of language use. Communicative competence is orientated towards this shift. While it is essential to recognize social factors in communicative competence, cognitive factors equally play an important roles as the encoding process is the primary source of communication in which encoders need to make use of all available resources, social as well as cognitive to achieve their communicative goals.

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## DISCUSSION

### *Traditional concept of communicative competence*

Communication and communicative competence have been studied in various disciplines such as education, linguistics, Artificial Intelligence, business, media etc. The main reason why communication has attracted attention across disciplines is that communication permeates virtually in all human interaction activities. What makes human beings unique is that human communication is very complex, cognitively, socially and emotionally. Traditionally the study of communicative competence tends to focus on oral communication and speech is treated as primary aspect. It is rather prescriptive in the sense that certain social features of communication are valued while others are rejected or worst condemned. The concept of communicative competence is therefore strongly affected by social norms and linguistic prejudice. A communicatively competent person is the one who speaks fluently, uses complicated long words, articulates well, and 'speaks like a book'. Those who use 'bad language' and speak with a broad dialect or sociolect, are normally ranked at the low scale of communicative competence.

### *Linguistic competence*

Structural linguistics studies language primarily as a code and the study of grammar focuses on sentence structure as the core unit of analysis. The contribution of structural linguistics to communication is its rejection of prescriptive nature of language description. It is based on the premise that language comes from people of various social backgrounds, not just confined to speakers of academic background or high social economic status. In this perspective, one can argue that every native speaker of a language has communicative competence. The notion of linguistic correctness has caused discomfort to the traditional prescriptive school which treats language on a normative basis. The following examples illustrate the division between the prescriptive and descriptive grammarians.

1a. I don't eat nothing.

1b. I eat nothing (or I don't eat anything).

Sentence 1a uses double negative.

2a. I recognize the student whom I danced with.

2b. I recognize the student with whom I danced.

Sentence 2a ends with a preposition.

3a. I like to strongly reject the view that poor students are lazy.

3b. I like to reject strongly the view that poor students are lazy.

Sentence 3a uses split infinitive.

To prescriptive grammarians, the first sentences (i.e. sentences 1a, 2a, and 3a) in the pairs are linguistically wrong as it does not belong to the way in which ‘educated’ people should use. Good communication should reject those ill-constructed sentences. The development of Generative Transformational Grammar in early 1960s with the influence of Chomsky introduced the dichotomy of competence and performance. Competence refers to the implicit knowledge of language and performance is affected by psychological and social factors. The problem with this dichotomy is that while competence is perceived as idealistic, performance is ignored. Human beings are perceived as grammarian beings that exist only in an abstract world. The real weakness of Generative Transformational Grammar is the treatment of meaning as peripheral, playing an interpretive role rather than a primary role in a language system and its rejection of social significance in language description.

### *Sociolinguistic competence*

While the influence of structural linguistics and Generative Transformational Grammar has stiffened the study of communicative competence, the development of sociolinguistics has widened the interest on the link between language and society in general and language in its social context in particularly. Communicative competence is no longer confined to linguistic grammaticality. Social appropriateness is the primary condition of communicative competence. This is why the term ‘sociolinguistic competence’ is used interchangeably with ‘communicative competence’. The following pairs of sentences reveal not the degrees of social appropriateness in sociolinguistic competence but a range of situations in which each register is selected by the speaker.

4a. Shut up!

4b. Listen to me.

4c. May I have your attention, please?

5a. What a load of rubbish!

5b. I disagree with you.

5c. Your view is unacceptable.

6a. Name? (with a rising intonation)

6b. What's your name?

6c. May I have your name?

The examples give above demonstrate that it is not one register is more correct than the others. Its use should be judged on its social appropriateness and communicative effectiveness. One would not expect two hostile men in the middle of a fight should use the polite register 4c or a delegate in an academic conference session would use register 5a to express his or her opinion.

### *Strategic competence*

While the development of sociolinguistics has shifted the interest in communicative competence from grammaticality to social appropriateness, the study of pragmatics has added a significant contribution to the concept of communicative competence. Thus the new term 'pragmatic competence' is introduced to emphasize not only the appropriateness of language in its social context but also the function of language use to achieve communicative goals. The following examples illustrate the difference between sociolinguistic competence in sentences 4, 5 and 6 given above and pragmatic competence in sentences from (a) to (f).

7a. You look beautiful, Mummy!

7b. All my friends have been to the zoo, except me.

7c. I won't love you any more if you don't take me to go to the zoo.

7d. A zoo has a lot of animals. We can learn a lot there.

7e. If I complete homework, will you take me to the zoo?

7f. I promise that I will be a good helper in the house.

In order to examine the choice of the sentences in (7), one needs to identify the situation and more importantly the motivation which leads to the linguistic choice. The girl wants to go to the zoo. There are a number of strategies she could use to achieve what she wants: to be allowed to go to the zoo. The following strategies are use:

- Praising: “You look beautiful, Mummy”. It is expected that finally the effective strategy should include “please, Mummy, could you take me to the zoo”.
- Appealing to justice/morality: “All my friends have been to the zoo, except me”. It implies that “It is unfair not to take me there”.
- Appealing to emotional blackmail: “I won’t love you any more if you don’t take me to the zoo”.
- Justifying: “The trip to the zoo is educational” and the underlying message is that “if you are interested in my education, and I think you are, you should take me to the zoo”. This strategy appeals to rationalisation.
- Conditioning: The child suggests a condition and negotiates it with the mother. The child should choose the condition which appeals to the mother.
- Promising: It is very similar to the conditioning strategy. While conditioning is a strong part of a negotiation, promising is a mild strategy.

The given examples indicate that pragmatics deals mainly with implicature, involving the way in which meaning is read into utterances. Speech acts are much more than ‘giving meaning’. They deal with ‘doing with words’.

In daily communicative interaction, communication strategies are often used as communication is basically functional. Communication is not just what a message is about but what it wants to achieve. Parents use communication strategies with their children at home, employers use them to reinforce workplace interaction; teachers use communication strategies to handle behaviour management, to motivate children in learning etc. Teachers who adopt a constructivist perspective in their teaching may focus on negotiating communication strategies whereas those who favour behaviourism are expected to use controlling strategies such as conditioning, praising, and threatening. In

second language learning, communicative strategy has been studied by applied linguists such as Selinker (1972), Tarone (1980), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Poulisse (1990), and Bialystock (1990). However, the focus tends to be on how learners manage a conversation when their knowledge of the target language is limited. It involves coping strategies of their interlanguage.

### ***Conversational Analysis and communicative competence***

Conversation permeates every aspect of interpersonal communication. Conversation takes place between two neighbors, among children in a class, in doctor-patient talk, between two friends waiting at a bus stop etc. Conversation is so widely used and accepted as a common verbal activity that its complexity tends to be taken for granted. However, since there has been a growing interest in the nature of conversation in the fields of Artificial Intelligence (AI), communication disorders and intercultural communication, conversation has become an academic subject and has attracted the attention of researchers in traditional disciplines such as sociology, psychology and linguistics. Conversation Analysis (CA) focuses on the following aspects of conversation:

- What is a conversation?
- What are the principles which underlie a conversation?
- How does a conversation work?
- What are the functions of conversation?

One of the central features of CA is the notion of turn-taking. Turn-taking does not occur chaotically. It is an active process of meaning making among participants. In an adjacent pair, as in question-answer structure for instance, the participants need to take parts in a 'constructive way' to maintain the flow of the conversation. The following example illustrates this *coherent* nature of conversation.

- Speaker 1: I have not seen you lately. Where have you been?
- Speaker 2: Yes, I have been away, to Beijing for a conference
- Speaker 1: Do you like Beijing?
- Speaker 2: Not bad! It's very crowded. Have you been there?

- Speaker 1: I was there last year, right in the middle of winter.

The conversation will break down if it turns out incoherently as follows:

- Speaker 1: I have not seen you lately. Where have you been?

- Speaker 2: I have sandwiches for lunch.

- Speaker 1: Do you like sandwiches?

- Speaker 2: Paris is beautiful. Have you been there?

The term ‘conversational disability’ applies where conversational coherence is violated. When a conversation is likely to break down, participants are expected to use repairing strategies to bring it back to a working order. It is argued that conversational ability should be a component of communicative competence.

- Speaker 1: I have not seen you lately. Where have you been?

- Speaker 2: I have sandwiches for lunch.

- Speaker 1: I see. By the way, you have been away lately, haven’t you?

- Speaker 2: Yes, we took a trip to the East Coast.

In this example, speaker 1 acknowledges the ‘move’ on ‘eating sandwiches’ initiated by speaker 2 and redirect the flow of the conversation to the original move on ‘where speaker 2 went’.

### ***Communicative competence and interlanguage***

Language learning cannot be divorced from its culture. Language is a clear manifestation of culture. A word can have both cognitive meaning and cultural meaning. Cultural meaning refers to words and expressions which represent cultural perception, values and behaviour. One can argue that there is no significance in cultural meaning of the word ‘computer’ in Vietnamese and English. However, words such as ‘village’, ‘family’, ‘friendship’ are deeply embedded in culture and only those who share the same culture can fully comprehend their meanings. At discourse level, the link between language, communication and culture is virtually inseparable. Miscommunication occurs when one interprets communicative rules of one culture in terms of the rules of another

culture. For instance, both Vietnamese and English have words to express apology and thank. However, both languages use these terms differently to express their cultural meanings. Similarly, there are different ways of using verbal compliment, greeting, and complaining. Contrastive pragmatics studies the similarities and differences in intercultural discourse. Negative interference occurs when there is a cultural gap between two communicative systems. In the process of learning a second language, learners make numerous errors due to first language interference. Linguistic errors may cause mispronunciation, syntactic deviance, and miscomprehension. Inter-discourse errors can create disharmony and hostility in communicative interaction between speakers of different cultural backgrounds. For instance, a Vietnamese may say 'sorry' by giving a gentle smile whereas an Australian counterpart may misinterpret it as impolite. As previously discussed, the concept 'strategic competence' should be widened to include tactics or strategies of speech acts which are used to achieve communicative aims. Fahey's study shows that in Irish, the expression of regret is the favored apology strategy. However, this strategy in the Chilean context does not have the same value as it does in the Irish context. ...thus the expression of regret on its own, especially in case of serious offences, is not always appropriate to express the necessary contrition culturally needed for apologizing. Fahey states:

Intercultural communication presents many challenges and one of them refers to the need to create awareness about the importance of understanding speech acts cross-culturally. Speech acts are what the writer or speaker is doing in uttering a particular form of words, and their focus is on meaning (speaker's intention). The recognition of the meaning of a particular speech act in a given cultural setting is at the heart of successful intercultural communication. Speech acts are considered universal, nevertheless research shows that they can manifest differently across languages and cultures.

## CONCLUSION

The terms 'strategic competence' and 'communication strategies' are often used in examining interlanguage. It seems that the focus tends to be on learners' strategies in dealing with conversational problems in second language learning due to their limited knowledge of the second language such as paraphrasing, withdrawing, and ignoring. It is



argued that the focus on conversational ability is useful. However, one needs to expand the scope of communicative competence to include the notion of 'tactic' as fundamentally language users know what language is only if they know what language can do for them.

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