
Reimagining Communicative Competence*

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Introduction

While communicative competence (CC) was a heavily utilized concept in linguistic anthropology (e.g. Saville-Troike 1989; Bauman and Sherzer 1979; Duranti 1988; Ochs 1988) and applied linguistics (e.g. Savignon 1982; Kramsch 1993; Canale and Swain 1980; Berns 1990; Byram 1997) in the 1980's and 1990's,¹ outside of language socialization studies the term seems to have fallen out of use.² What one finds instead is a tremendous amount of work being done in areas, such as enregisterment (e.g. Agha 2003; Johnstone 2006; Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson 2006), language ideology (for book length treatments alone see Blommaert 1999; Philips 1998; Kroskrity 2000; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Bauman and Briggs 2003), crossing (e.g. Rampton 1995; Rampton 2006; the papers in Rampton 1999), identity, performance, and narrative (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; De Fina 2003; De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg 2006; Ochs and Capps 2001; Berman 1998), and communities of practice (e.g. Davies 2005; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999; Eckert and Wenger 2005; Moore 2006; Barton and Tusting 2005), among others.

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- 1 It is worth noting that in the work of many early applied linguists (e.g. Savignon 1982; Canale and Swain 1980; Berns 1990) the term communicative competence took on a life of its own diverging from Hymes' (1972; 1974; 1989 [1974]) original conception as it related to doing ethnographic studies of language in social life. More recently there has been a return to Hymes original notion as it related to his wider concerns of doing linguistic anthropological research using SPEAKING (Hymes 1972) in the work of Kramsch (1993), Duff (2002) and Byram, Roberts and colleagues (e.g. Roberts et al. 2000; Byram, Nichols, and Stevens 2001, 2001; Byram and Fleming 1998; Barro, Jordan, and Roberts 1998).
- 2 For recent summaries see Garrett and Baquadano-Lopez (2002), Kulick and Schieffelin (2004) and Ochs (2001).

While the inter-relationship between many of these research areas has often been explored or highlighted (e.g. De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg 2006; Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Rampton 2006), the relationship of these to communicative competence seems to have been largely ignored. Accordingly, my main purpose in this paper is to examine whether and to what extent earlier notions of CC are still applicable today. In particular, I will take a historical look at how Hymes (1972), Gumperz (1982) and scholars of language socialization (e.g. Ochs 1988; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986) have developed this term before exploring how recent work in linguistic anthropology in the areas of semiotic registers, language ideologies, appropriation and recontextualization might be integrated with this concept. In doing so I will also explore the extent to which these concepts can inform and be informed by wider concerns relating to media and mass migration (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Rampton 2006) and Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice. In doing so, I should also point out that although discussion about sociolinguistic theory (e.g. Carter and Sealy 2000; Coupland, Sarangi, and Candlin 2001) have touched on Hymes' notion of communicative competence, they seem to have overlooked CC's further development into a robust sociolinguistic theory in the field of language socialization (see especially Ochs 1988: Ch. 1).

Communicative Competence

In this section I start by briefly looking at Hymes' original notion of communicative competence in the context of his wider concerns for investigating the inter-relationships between language and social life (Hymes 1972, 1974). I then go on to look at how CC has been taken up in interactional sociolinguistic (Gumperz 1982) and by those developing the fields of language socialization (e.g. Ochs 1988; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986; Schieffelin 1990) and the study of everyday narrative (e.g. Ochs 2004).

For Hymes (1972: 281–282, 277) being communicatively competent meant being able to use linguistic forms appropriately; that is, to know when to speak, to whom to speak, where to speak, and in what manner to speak. In a paper (re)published at around the same time Hymes (1972) elaborates on this position through his discussion about a framework for carrying out linguistic anthropological research. In this work being communicatively competent meant knowing how to associate topics, message forms, participants, and feelings with particular settings and activities. Investigating what CC means to a particular speaker entails finding out how a speaker conducts and interprets speech in interaction (Hymes 1972: 52). As he noted in other papers, this was most fruitfully carried out within a framework he devised called “the ethnography of speaking/communication” (e.g. Hymes 1972, 1974, 1989 [1974]).

Essentially this meant one would start one's investigation by looking at a speech community and the varieties of language one finds within this speech community. This stressed the social nature of the description rather than its linguistic nature (Hymes 1972: 54) while also avoiding the pitfall of equating a speech community with

one particular language (Hymes 1974: 47). Hymes (1972: 55) went on to note that perhaps the most essential part of defining a speech community for description was that it formed an integral social unit whose members could be found in a common location and whose daily interactions formed a large part of what he termed their “primary interaction”.

Once one had defined a speech community for description, then one needed to explore some of the numerous situations that would be associated with certain kinds of speech or their absence thereof. This unit of analysis was termed a “speech situation” (Hymes 1972: 56). “Speech events”, on the other hand, dealt with what happened in these speech situations. Within a speech event one could also find a speech act or a number of speech acts, which represent the minimal items for analysis (Hymes 1972: 56). Together these made up settings and activities.

In order to discover how a member of a speech community associates topics, message forms, participants, feelings, and so on with settings and activities the ethnographer of communication needs to gather data in a way which enabled comparisons between different speech acts, events and situations. As can be seen in Table 1, Hymes suggested gathering and interpreting data on message form, the content of the message, the act sequence, the setting, the scene, the participants and their relationship to each other, purposes or ends, key, channels, forms of speech, norms of interaction, norms of interpretation, and genres; or data on SPEAKING for short (Hymes 1972: 60–65).

In further developing the notion of communicative competence Gumperz (1982: 153–171) noted the difficulty of working out norms. He used conversation analysis and post-recording evaluations and commentary to help understand how such norms related to contextual features like role relationships, physical setting, attitudes, social values, language variety, prosody, et cetera (and knowledge thereof) in situated interactions. After proposing that these elements were used and interpreted—as “contextualization cues”—in an ongoing interaction he offered the following definition of communicative competence:

Table 1 Hymes' (1972a: 58–66) original formulation³

S	Situation	<i>Setting</i>
		Time and place of speech act
		<i>Scene</i>
		Cultural definition of a scene as formal, appropriate, etc
P	Participants	<i>Speaker or sender</i>
		<i>Addressor</i>
		<i>Hearer, or receiver, or audience</i>
		<i>Addressee</i>
E	Ends	<i>Purpose-outcomes</i>
		Conventionally recognized or expected outcomes of interaction
		<i>Purpose-goals</i>
		Interpretation thereof can differ from participant to participant
A	Act Sequence	<i>Message content</i>
		What is said.
		What is unsaid.
		<i>Message form</i>
		How it is said.
K	Key	<i>Tone, manner or spirit in which an act is done</i>
I	Instrumentalities	<i>Channels</i>
		Is it oral (can be talk, humming,), written,
		<i>Forms of speech</i>
		Code, language variety, register
N	Norms	<i>Norms of interaction</i> —(as observed?)
		Rules about when and how to interrupt, how loud one should speak, how close one should be to hearer when engaged in dyadic conversation, etc.
		<i>Norms of interpretation</i>
		Belief system about interaction (similar to norms of interaction). How loudness, pause, rhythm is used to signal intent and interpret utterances (Gumperz 1982)
G	Genre	<i>Categories of Speech</i> (often coincide with speech events)
		Poems, Curse, Prayer, Lecture, Myth, Tale, Proverb, Riddle

3 Hymes also highlights the inter-relationship and overlap between these elements.

Communicative competence can be defined in interactional terms as ‘the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation,’ and thus involves both grammar and contextualization. While the ability to produce grammatical sentences is common to all who count as speakers of a language or dialect, knowledge of conversational convention varies along different dimensions.... this type of variation does not show a one to one relationship to ethnic groups or language and dialect boundaries as established through historical reconstruction, but that discourse level conventions reflect prolonged interactive experience by individuals cooperating in institutionalized settings in the pursuit of shared goals in friendship, occupational and similar networks of relationships. Once established, such conventions come to serve as communicative resources which ... facilitate communication and enable individuals to build on shared understandings which eliminate the need for lengthy explanations. Knowledge of how such conventions work often becomes a precondition for effective participation in longer verbal encounters and for enlisting others’ cooperation in activities in the home, at work and in public affairs (Gumperz 1982: 209).

This interactional perspective is further expanded in Ochs (1988: Chapter 1) who draws on practice and system reproduction theory (e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984), theories of learning (e.g. Vygotsky 1978), indexicality (Silverstein 1976), hermeneutic philosophy (e.g. Gadamer 1976), literary theory (e.g. Bakhtin 1981) concerning the sociohistorical nature of texts, theories of politeness (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]), and work on interpersonal conduct (e.g. Goffman 1981; Cicourel 1973), among many others. In this view communicative competence was seen as both knowledge and practice where meaning is simultaneously negotiated and co-constructed by participants, the process thereof contributes to the reproduction of structures and text histories, while also being informed or mediated by local constraints (Ochs 1988: 21). In this view communicative competence is learned and (re)produced through observation and participation in daily social interactions, including direct coaching from more skilled members (Ochs 1996: 410–411).

Media, Migration, Community, Ideology and Appropriation

The above language socialization studies were carried out in small relatively isolated pacific communities nearly thirty years ago. In this section I suggest that CC, as a concept and framework is still highly useful, although it needs to be able to accommodate the increasing role media has in producing certain types of competences and more generally the increasingly mobility of people.

Appadurai (1996: 3), for example, has argued that the increasing presence of the media in peoples’ everyday lives, especially its ability to provide resources for many kinds of identity formation projects, necessitates an increased focus on the role of the media. As Appadurai goes on to argue, the media coupled with unprecedented

levels of migration (both voluntary and involuntary) has impelled and compelled the work of the imagination in a way that allows for the formation of “diasporic public spheres” (p. 4) or imagined communities across territorial boundaries (p. 8). Linguistic anthropologists have started to look at this aspect of communicative competence, although from a semiotic perspective. For example, Agha (2007) has pointed out that when mass mediated messages link persons or groups with representations of language use this contributes to the formation of a semiotic register. This enables subsequent appropriation of linguistic fragments—as “emblems of identity” (Agha 2007)—from such semiotic registers in interactions among members of diasporic communities and their hosts (Rampton 1995, 2006, 1999; Cutler 1999). Having said this, however, we also need to keep in mind that production of these stereotypes of indexicality in the popular mass media does not necessarily mean that such stereotypes will be homogeneously appropriated given different consumption tastes and different ways of using and understanding mass-mediated messages (e.g. Agha 2007; Friedman 2006; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002; Spitulnik 1996, 1993).

Given rapid people flows and mass migration it is now increasingly hard to make definitions of community or speech community (e.g. Bauman 1998; Blommaert 2003; Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005; Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002). Accordingly, it is also wrong-headed to look for straight-forward relationships between groups of people and language forms. Instead, I define community as on the one hand situational, but also reliant on and contributing to wider circulating socio-historical language ideologies (e.g. Agha 2007; Wortham 2006). In line with Garret and Baquedano (2002), I suggest that the incorporation of communities of practice theory (Wenger 1998) into language socialization theory helps produce an even more robust framework that can accommodate these concerns.

Wenger’s (1998: 4–5) “communities of practice” focuses on meaning, learning and identity as a result of participation in the practices of social communities. Essentially, meaning is the product of its negotiation between those engaged in social practice (Wenger 1998: 54). Participation not only shapes newcomers experience and identity in relation to that particular community, but it also shapes and transforms the community in which (s)he interacts (Wenger 1998: 55–57) and indeed shapes what is meant by “community” for those who participate. The development of a shared repertoire, that is reification, is dependent upon mutual engagement—such as, doing things together, relationships—and a joint negotiated enterprise where there is mutual accountability and local responses (Wenger 1998: 73).

Thus, the development of a community of practice (COP) and with it the learning of shared repertoires requires a number of participants engaging in sustained cooperation or conflict working toward what becomes a negotiated outcome (Wenger 1998: 86). Such reified repertoires can then in turn be used in future negotiations of meaning (Wenger 1998: 58). To put this in terms of work in linguistic anthropology, we can say that participants’ initial interactions represent part of a “speech chain” (Agha 2003)—say, Speech Chain 1—where subsequent participation in a new speech chain (say, Speech Chain 2) by at least one of the participants involved in the initial speech chain can help reify particular meanings (e.g. Wortham 2005). Moreover, this

set of speech chains can be nested within larger speech chains and/or communities of practice in cases where there are other peripheral participants. For example, those who are ratified or not but who may learn from observing the interaction in Speech Chain 1.

Although the construction of a COP requires participation in re-occurring settings to produce meanings and identities, it is also clear from other research that during such interactions participants appropriate and “recontextualize” (e.g. Bauman and Briggs 1990) wider circulating texts and ideologies found in the media as part of the meaning making process (e.g. Rampton 2006; Cutler 1999; Bucholtz 1999; Reyes 2005; Mäkitalo and Säljö 2002; Silverstein and Urban 1996; Wortham 2005). Thus, participation creates community, while also utilizing structures or texts that have been (re)produced by others in the past (cf. Bakhtin 1981). While such an approach suggests the importance of agency, I also wish to highlight the continued need to bear in mind systemic constraints (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Carter and Sealy 2000).

In this regard Bourdieu’s (1984; 1977; 1990) work provides us with a cautionary note as to the extent actors are free from the influence of social structures. In line with recent linguistic interpretations of his work (e.g. Blackledge and Pavlenko 2002: 123; Scheuer 2003: 145) I understand Bourdieu’s argument to imply that while actors are both a product and producer of their “habitus”, nevertheless an actor’s habitus endows them with certain tastes which in essence provides them with certain dispositions and rules for the carrying out of their everyday practices. Such dispositions represent the taken-for-granted and unsaid rules for carrying out social practices that actors learn over their history of participation in or “trajectory” across different “fields” or social settings. To this extent then, habitus can be seen as certain social structures that are hidden to participants’ immediate conscious concerns, representing a type of common sense, natural and in effect ideological viewpoint of the world and the way it works.

As Bourdieu (1994: 13) has argued in his later work, we also need to understand the often unseen role played by states and institutions in the production of habitus. In other words we need to understand whether and to what extent the state plays a role in creating social structures and the conditions of production which put people in certain situations to begin with. In some ways this resonates with the concerns of some philosophical thought defined as “critical realism” (e.g. Joseph 1998; Crothers 1999), where the state is seen as occupying a privileged position to the extent that it helps control and define economic capital and its manifestations as forms of cultural and symbolic capital, such as educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1990: 135), or facilitate actors understanding of what is and isn’t cultural and symbolic capital. Where critical realism seems to depart is its insistence that structures pre-exists actions and that as a result social scientists need to dig deeper when looking for causal relationships (Joseph 1998: 14).

In this respect Bauman’s (1998: 80–100) and Appadurai’s (1996) work on globalization and its cultural dimensions seems appropriate. For example, Bauman’s notion that peoples’ ability and inability to consume helps explain some people movements (see also Giddens 1973). Similarly, Appadurai’s work on media and migration helps also explain such movements. Also of relevance is his notion of how

consumption patterns are repetitive and tied with the body, ritual, media and imagination (Appadurai 1996: 67–75). In this sense, we can see the inter-relationships between the local and wider political, economic and social processes as they relate to the structuring of society.

A Modified Heuristic for Exploring Communicative Competence or Semiotic Register Formation

To summarize my argument thus far, we can say that the notion of communicative competence has moved from something a person or community has (e.g. Hymes 1972; Gumperz 1982), to something that is learned, co-constructed and reproduced through participation (e.g. Ochs 1988, 1990, 1996), to something that is also situation specific and constantly changing (Wenger 1998; Appadurai 1996), but also constrained in certain ways (Bourdieu 1977, 1994; Bauman 1998). Moreover, actors consumption of the media (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Agha 2007, 2007) and elsewhere—may produce stereotypes of indexicality that are potential resources to be appropriated and recontextualized in interaction (e.g. Bakhtin 1981; Bauman and Briggs 1990).

More specifically, for those wishing to carry out research in this tradition to investigate what it means to be a communicatively competent participant in a particular setting, the SPEAKING framework originally outlined by Hymes (1972) could be modified as in Table 2 below with the inter-relationships between each element within any speech event being classified as an emergent semiotic register (e.g. Agha 2007; Wortham 2006). That is to say, a semiotic register can be defined as a category of signs, such as linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors, personas, affective stances, place, space, etcetera that can mutually implicate each other when used individually (Agha 2007).

Table 2 A modified model for researching communicative competence

S	Act situation	+ <i>Constraints</i> —Need to consider: 1) What has brought participants to this particular setting? Is it related to patterns of consumption, global economic changes, income, etc.? (e.g. Bourdieu, Z. Bauman, Appadurai)
P	Participants	> <i>Participation</i> 1) Always situated 2) a multiparty accomplishment 3) Shaped by the audience but also shapes the audience (Goodwin and Goodwin 2004: 231–232). 4) Community is built and contested at the micro-level through participation (Wenger 1998). 5) System Reproduction (e.g. Giddens 1984; Ochs 1988)
E	Ends	Stays the same.
A	Act Sequence	Relates also to practice and system (re)production and processes of enregisterment.

K	Key	Same
I	Instrumentalities	Add mass mediated representations of language use keeping in mind that production does not in any way guarantee reception. Moreover, the meaning of word forms constantly emerges and/or is renegotiated across speech events (e.g. Wortham 2006).
N	Norms	+ Local and National Language Ideologies
G	Genre	Primarily the same but keeping in mind the emergent nature of genre. Genre here perhaps most closely represents a semiotic register in Agha's (2007) terms.

Conclusions

In this article I have traced the development of the notion of communicative competence in linguistic anthropology and tried to imagine how it might be conceptualized given current concerns in linguistic anthropology as well as concerns relating to media, community and mass migration. I have argued that with some modification this framework is still quite useful as a heuristic for investigating ways of speaking. In particular, I have looked at how recent notions relating to communities of practice can inform this framework. In doing so, I argued that such an approach allowed for the existence of multiple simultaneous communities of practice in any one setting. For example, dyadic and triadic conversations represent small communities of practice, which when observed by other peripheral participants contribute to the simultaneous construction of larger communities of practice. In other words, the smaller COP is nested within larger communities of practice. In this regard, my model differs to Wenger's (1998) and other sociolinguistic treatments of communities of practice (e.g. Davies 2005; Eckert and Wenger 2005; Bucholtz 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999) insofar as my unit of analysis is essentially participation amongst primarily ratified participants. Indeed, it more closely resembles Agha's (2007) idea of emerging semiotic registers.

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