A systematic procedure for assessing communicative competence

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Linguistic and communicative competence

Language is a notoriously complex human activity. It has been traditionally described as a series of organized structures that can be examined at different levels, such as phonology, lexicon, morphology, syntax and discourse. One cannot always make clear distinctions among these levels, and many theories postulate a gradation, rather than a clear distinction, among these levels. For example, a number of researchers demonstrate that there is considerable continuity between syntactic and discursive features (Ford, Fox & Thompson 2002; Fox 2007; Kärkkäinen et al. 2007; Selting & Couper-Kuhlen 2001).

Nor can one easily distinguish between linguistic competences and other varieties of competence. The object of study for linguistics, as stated by Chomsky (1965: p.3–4) in an oft-cited and oft-criticized passage, sets clearly defined limits: "Linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community who knows his language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of language in actual performance... We thus make a fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language) and *performance*, the actual use of language in concrete situations". Chomsky's theory has been reformulated a number of times, but the distinction between competence and performance remains essential. Chomsky (1981) later introduced another distinction to better specify the domain of his linguistic research: that of "core" and "periphery". The core aspects of language would be considered central, stable and invariant, whereas the peripheral aspects would be governed by a more probabilistic logic and would display variation both within the community of speakers and within the individual speaker. More recently, another dichotomy has been added, namely "faculty of language in the broad sense" (*i.e.*, those cognitive processes that form part of many other abilities in humans and animals) and "faculty of language in the narrow sense" (*i.e.*, those cognitive processes that are exclusive to humans) (Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch 2002).

All of the distinctions that Chomsky makes clearly imply an intention to focus only on several well-defined aspects of language (*competence* as opposed to *performance*, *core* rather than *periphery*). They represent the "concern of linguistic theory," as intended by Chomsky and by many linguists today. Other linguists, by contrast, have chosen to adopt a much broader view of language, following Hymes' (1972) suggestion to study "communicative competence". Such a study takes into account the 'basic' structures of language but then grows broader to include the social mechanisms that form the basis of linguistic variation within a community, along with the factors that regulate language use in real-life situations. The choice of a broader or narrower view of language relates directly to the boundaries of one's chosen field of inquiry, to the kind of data one gathers, and to the kind of statements one can make. As Lyons (1996: p.25) observes, "In the present state of theory and research the generally recognized boundaries between the different branches of linguistics are well motivated. My point, rather, is that the boundaries are drawn for theoretical and methodological reasons; they are not necessarily given in nature. ... For certain purposes it may be appropriate to disregard the inherently psychological notion of competence entirely; for others it may be appropriate to introduce a broader, non-classical, notion of linguistic competence which deliberately rejects the postulate of homogeneity or the distinction between pragmatic and communicative, sociolinguistic and stylistic competence".

Clearly, for most people who work in educational settings, who are concerned with language policy, or who themselves use languages regularly or are learning languages, too narrow a definition of competence is inadequate. Some researchers, such as Shohami who works within a language testing framework, maintain that the very notion of communicative competence as proposed by Hymes is too narrow and needs to be expanded to a construct that includes "psychology, sociology, communication, L1 [and] subject matter" (Shohami 1996: p.149). However, this may lead one to wonder where the boundaries of such a construct should be drawn if it is to have empirical, operational significance. Bachman (1990) explores the issue by proposing the notion of "strategic competence", that is, the ability to draw on one's knowledge and to use it in real-life situations. Strategic competence, for Bachman, represents one of the factors that make up "communicative language ability". He admits, however, that "it is here that we begin to enter the realm of general cognitive abilities, or intelligence" (p.106). "Psychophysiological mechanisms" do not appear to be part of "communicative language ability", although they are considered important "to fully characterize language use" (p.107). In short, one can extend the concept of communicative competence infinitely, until it includes all cognitive and sociocultural abilities, but this effectively renders it useless in operational terms. Instead one must try

to provide a more restricted definition of the concept, while at the same time acknowledging its relationship with other kinds of ability (one attempt at defining "communicative language competence" explicitly and in great detail is offered by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR], Council of Europe, 2001).

In addition to those scholars who suggest broadening the realm of competence, others have more recently questioned the very notion of competence as distinct from *use* and *performance*. The notion of competence, wide-ranging though it may be, in any case refers to an isolated individual and, thus, to an essentially psychological, "intra-organismic" dimension (Halliday 1978), to the individual's potential 'know-how' which exists beyond and prior to the actual conditions of use. The clear distinction made between competence and performance, or between knowledge and use, has further been questioned by those who adopt an 'emergentist' approach. Researchers working within this paradigm have demonstrated that, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, the language system emerges from use, from the interactive practices enacted by the children, adults and, more generally, the members of a community. It is, therefore, impossible to understand language by detaching it from its uses (Ellis 1998; Hopper 1998; McWhinney 2002; O' Grady 2008; Tomasello 2003). According to these researchers, learning occurs through exposure to concrete examples from which patterns of regularity are gradually extracted within shared discursive practices. As Hopper (1998: p.162) remarks, "children do not seem to learn sentences, but rather, they learn to adapt their behaviour to increasingly complex surroundings". The distinction between learning linguistic rules and social rules, therefore, appears to be more highly blurred, in much the same way as the distinction between "rules," regularities, practices, and interactions. What one learns is how to participate in "discursive practices," which also implies knowledge of linguistic structures but goes well beyond this (Young & Miller 2004).

Some scholars (Mondada 2006; Pekarek-Doehler 2006) have taken a step forward in proposing an ethnomethodological reformulation of the notion of competence, conceptualizing it not as an individual psychological trait but rather as a social phenomenon that arises in interaction and is co-constructed by the participants. More generally, this reformulation carries with it a redefinition in social terms of many constructs related to "cognition". That is, cognition is understood not as a series of "private" psychological processes but rather as a social phenomenon, an activity that can be publicly displayed (Kasper 2008, 2009).

Finally, there remains the question of whether these different notions of competence can be applied separately to each language that a person knows, as if there were many independent competences for the different languages, or whether it would not be better to think in terms of a "multi-competence" (Cook 2008)

that encompasses different language systems, with its own unique dynamics, that may not be traced back to the sum total of the different monolingual competences. As Cook (2008: p.19) asserts, "to respect the multi-competence idea, we can never regard an L2 user as an unsuccessful native speaker, only as a different kind of person in their own right, an extrapolation of Labov's argument about difference between speakers not entailing deficit (Labov 1969). So the term 'L2 user' often became preferred to 'L2 learner' since it allows the person to achieve a final state rather than to be a perpetual 'learner' always on the way to native speaker status but doomed never to get there".

In this chapter, we will focus in particular on languages (second, third or beyond) as spoken by those who have learned them after childhood. We identify them as 'interlanguages' (Selinker 1972) or 'learner varieties' (Hendriks 2005). The two terms reflect different, though equally important, characteristics of such systems. 'Interlanguage' represents a transitional system among several languages that is unstable and changing. By contrast, the term 'learner variety' emphasizes the fact that such systems are fully part of the sociolinguistic system of a community, which comprises both those people who were born and raised there as well as those who have come there at a later stage in life.

Dimensions of variability in competence

Many studies have found a wide variability in interlanguage systems, as in all human language systems (for reviews see Bayley & Preston 1996; Tarone 2007). Interpreting this variability has given rise to a lively debate between those, on the one hand, who maintain that it should be included in a competence (Ellis 1990; 1999) or "capability" (Tarone 1988) model for learners and those, on the other hand, who hold that it is related to performance factors, that is, the application of different rules in different contexts of use but not to knowledge of the rules themselves which may or may not be known to the learners (Gregg 1990). Clearly, this distinction is also based on different conceptions of grammar: those who view grammar as a set of categorical rules, veritable switches that can only be turned 'on' or 'off' (as in the case of many versions of Universal Grammar), and those who consider it a probabilistic matter whereby the phenomena that appear categorical are in reality the end points along a continuum of probability (Bod, Hay & Jannedy 2003; Sorace & Keller 2005; for a probabilistic approach to L2 grammars, see Klein & Dittmar 1979). Regardless of the theoretical interpretation given for variability in interlanguage systems, its existence is universally

recognized in much the same way as one recognizes that there are different types of variability.

First of all, someone who learns another language is exposed to variability inherent to the L2 system. Most studies on this topic have been carried out on the French language (for a review see Dewaele 2004b). A number of authors have focused on the omission of the particle *ne* in negative sentences. Dewaele and Regan (2002) have observed that the omission of *ne* in Flemish Belgian students tends to be more pronounced in more advanced learners and among those who have had greater exposure to French in their daily lives. Dewaele (2004a) has further demonstrated that learners tend to omit *ne* more often when they interact with native speakers as compared with other non-native speakers, thus revealing a phenomenon of convergence with their interlocutors. Regan (1996), for example, has shown how Irish learners of French, following a stay in France, considerably increase the rate of omission of *ne*, essentially in the same contexts where this would occur among native speakers. This shows, in effect, the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, even if in some cases a kind of hypercorrection is observed whereby the informal linguistic variety, the omission of *ne*, is overextended to a wider range of contexts than is otherwise observed among native speakers. Mougeon et al. (2002), conversely, report a smaller difference in the use of linguistic varieties in formal contexts between learners of French and native speakers. Both in terms of the omission of *ne* in negative statements and the deletion of *schwa*, more frequently observed in informal contexts as opposed to formal ones, native speakers tend to display greater difference relative to non native speakers, whose production does not vary significantly across contexts. Taken together, these studies reveal that frequency of contact with native speakers is the factor which most determines the extent to which variation in the second language is learned, whereas exposure to the second language only through school textbooks and use of the target language in the classroom drastically reduces the possibility of developing non-standard language varieties.

Another variable structure in L2 French that has been the subject of research concerns the alternation between *on* and *nous* as the subject pronoun for the first-person plural (Swain & Lapkin 1990; Dewaele 2002; Lemée 2002; Rehner et al. 2003). All of these studies show an increase in the use of *on* among advanced learners of French and among those who have greater opportunity to use French outside of school. Dewaele (2002), however, did not find significant differences in the use of the colloquial variety *on* as compared to *nous* among L2 learners of French who took part in an oral interview and completed a written essay. As a matter of fact, the use of *on* was slightly greater in the written task. The learners which Lemée (2002) observed, too, did not vary in their use of *on / nous* according to the formality of the context. Thus, it appears that, at least initially, the use

of *on* is related to the general development of the language and only later on is the sociolinguistic competence acquired whereby *on* comes to be associated with more informal contexts.

A second source of variability that concerns the oral productions of both multilingual and monolingual people is related to situation and communicative activities. In a series of studies, Tarone demonstrated how tasks that require relatively more or relatively less attention lead to production of different interlanguage varieties (Tarone 1985, Tarone & Parrish 1988). Tarone and Liu (1995) document the case of a child learner of English who systematically used different forms of questions depending on whether he was talking to a teacher, the researcher or a friend. An extensive line of research has been developed around studying the relationships between different communicative tasks and several variables that characterize L2 production, operationally defined as Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency (CAF) (for reviews, see van Daele et al. 2007; *Applied Linguistics* 2009). A series of studies has shown that having time available to plan a specific task, in general, tends to increase the fluency and the complexity of production, although this does not always hold true for accuracy (Ellis 2009). Other studies have focused on the relationship between task complexity and the kind of language produced. The two competing models in this area are Skehan's (1998; 2001) limited attentional capacity model and Robinson's (2001) cognition hypothesis. In the first case, faced with complex communicative tasks, learners' limited attentional capacity leads them either to draw on a cognitive processing system based on memorized examples, thereby fostering fluency, or to draw on a cognitive processing system based on rules, thus promoting complexity and/or accuracy. An increase in fluency will, therefore, be accompanied by a decrease in complexity and/or accuracy, and vice versa, but the three variables will not increase together in the case of complex tasks. For Robinson, specific task characteristics, that he defines as *resource directing*, entail the simultaneous increase of all three performance variables. At present, the research does not provide conclusive evidence in support of either model, and the question still remains open. In several recent studies, researchers have also attempted to isolate the role of interaction as a variable by observing how performance varies in interactive tasks as compared to those monological ones (Michel et al. 2007). Results suggest that interactive tasks facilitate lexical complexity and accuracy whereas monological tasks promote lexical and syntactic complexity.

A speaker who is already multilingual and is acquiring an additional language presents another type of variability essentially related to his or her condition as a language learner. On the one hand, there is diachronic variability with regard to the gradual transformation of the interlanguage system towards the target lan-

guage. On the other hand, at any moment throughout the language learning process, there may be different representations of the same rule that are produced with different probabilities. In some cases, one can estimate the probability of one variant being produced over another based on whether a number of intra- and extra-linguistic factors are present or absent. Some researchers have attempted to build logistic regression models by using the VARBRUL program, in keeping with Labov's (1972) concept of 'variable rule'. As a case in point, Young (1988) has demonstrated how at least ten variables contribute to determining when learners of L2 English produce the *-s* morpheme in the plural form. The variables include sociological ones (the identity of the interlocutor), semantic ones (a living or non-living referent), syntactic ones (the position of the noun in the noun phrase, the function of the noun phrase in the utterance), pragmatic ones (whether there are other indicators of plurality in the text) and phonological ones. All of these variables, in turn, interact with the level of competence attained in the second language. Some may have a stronger effect in beginning language learners, others may have a greater impact in advanced language learners, and still others may be influential at all stages of language acquisition.

Although the difference here is quantitative rather than qualitative in nature, variability within the interlanguage system is much more pronounced as compared to variability within the relatively stable language systems of native speakers or very advanced learners. Some scholars, such as Ellis (1999), maintain that it is, in fact, this variability and instability which serves as the basis for restructuring learner's varieties toward the target language variety represented in the community in question. Berdan (1996) has demonstrated this empirically, using the VARBRUL program to show how one learner's development of the negative form in English goes through stages in which different modalities of language production coexist, each one influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by a number of factors. The analysis reveals how the transition from one stage to the next comes about gradually through a series of systems that are characterized by internal variation.

The notion of linguistic-communicative competence is, therefore, complex and multifaceted. It may have some aspects which are more central and others that overlap with other kinds of competence. It may have some features which are more stable and others that vary along multiple dimensions. This complexity increases in multilingual speakers who move within two or more language communities of which they may have become members at different moments in their life.

Observing competence in interaction

Given this inherent variability and complexity, how is it then possible to observe, evaluate and measure linguistic and communicative competence? One answer to this question may be to isolate only small samples of language. Research in generative linguistics, following the work of Chomsky, is often based on judgments of acceptability that reflect a competence that ideally remains stable and relatively uninfluenced by performance factors like memory, attention and stress. Moreover, these studies focus on 'core' aspects of linguistic competence and deal with very general principles of sentence organization that tend to remain unchanged across different communicative situations and sociolinguistic registers.

Conversely, other approaches, that focus on other linguistic levels and use other definitions of competence, are based on different kinds of data. In particular, approaches that view competence as inextricably tied to language use draw on performance data, that is, oral or written productions. Participants are typically asked to carry out some sort of communicative task in order to observe their use of linguistic structures in a relatively ecologically valid context, one that is similar to a real-life situation where it would be necessary for the individual to convey information. Sometimes the task is designed in such a way as to encourage the production of specific linguistic structures. For instance, in order to elicit the production of the third-person singular form of the present tense, participants are asked to describe the usual activities of a character in a story. To elicit yes-no questions, participants are given the task of discovering the features of an unknown object by asking their interlocutor a series of questions. In other cases, the communicative task is more open-ended and can lead to the production of a variety of linguistic structures as, for example, when participants are invited to talk about a film or tell a story using a set of pictures (for reviews on the use of tasks in research and in teaching, see Ellis 2003; Gass & Mackey 2007; Samuda & Bygate 2008; Adams 2009).

In many studies, the selected communicative task leads to the production of an essentially oral monologue. This is considered an advantage for studying a certain type of linguistic competence, traditionally defined as an individual's psychological endowment allowing him or her to carry out specific actions. From this perspective, the conversational turns produced by an interlocutor are considered a source of interference because they may influence the productions of the observed individual or they may bring about 'incomplete' productions insofar as they are, to some extent, co-constructed by the different participants in the interaction. If, however, one is interested in interactional competence, then

the presence of different speakers becomes an integral part of the study because what one wishes to observe is precisely the interaction and how it develops over time. Thus, 'one-way' elicitation methods, whereby only one person is speaking, are not deemed appropriate but are, rather, lacking and limited (Young & He 1998). The construct of interactional competence includes the ability to adapt to conversational contingencies, to respond to conversational turns initiated by others, and to establish sequences of action that may eventually be taken up. As such, it can only be studied in contexts that are interactionally dynamic and complex.

To arrive at a full understanding of an individual's communicative competence, it is therefore necessary to gather data from both monologic and interactive situations. In addition, one cannot leave out the dimension of sociolinguistic variability that may be expressed, at the very least, along the macro-dimensions of formality/informality, social group membership and degree of mutual knowledge. Numerous studies have shown these dimensions to influence linguistic productions in different ways, both in terms of the choice of variants within a given linguistic code and in terms of the choice of linguistic codes themselves. One must also bear in mind those studies that demonstrate how the cognitive complexity of a particular task or the conditions under which it is carried out (*i.e.*, more or less time allotted for planning, the kind of conversational topic given and participants' degree of familiarity with this topic) can lead to systematic variation in the language produced.

In short, providing an overall picture of an individual's communicative competence, intended in the widest possible sense and with respect to all possible circumstances of use, is an unfeasible undertaking. One must acknowledge that all representations of such competence are necessarily limited, both in that they are based on limited sets of data drawn from the observation of a very partial set of behaviours with respect to all possible behaviours, and that they focus only on a few specific phenomena, not the entire range of things that a person is able to do under different circumstances. Bearing these two types of limitation in mind, one can thus consider two kinds of continuum. First, there is the continuum of data ranging from those data that are restricted to a single situation and a single type of activity to those data gathered in multiple social situations, with different interlocutors and as part of different communicative activities. Second, there is the continuum of analysis ranging from those analyses which focus on only one aspect of language (the pronunciation of a particular phoneme, the production of a specific grammatical rule such as the plural form) to those analyses which attempt to take into consideration a number of phenomena, both individually, examined one at a time, and collectively, attempting to tease out correlations

among the phenomena (for example, among a set of linguistic traits and a range of socio-communicative contexts).

In the next pages we will outline a procedure for collecting data that tends toward a broader view of competence. The goal of this procedure is to study the oral communicative competence of speakers taking part in different activities, monologic and dialogic, under different conditions (mediated or face-to-face), with different interlocutors (people of the same age or of different ages, people known or unknown to the participants). This procedure aims to strike a balance between the need for completeness and ecological validity, that would be maximized in a long-term ethnographic study involving many hours of audio-visual recording, and the need for comparability and internal validity, that can be achieved through the relative control of the type of activity carried out.

A procedure for observing communicative competence

The procedure that we outline here grew out of a nation-wide research project on the acquisition of linguistic and pragmatic competences. Although it can be usefully applied to a variety of contexts, the procedure has several peculiar features that should be acknowledged here. First of all, the procedure was designed to collect samples of interlanguage at an intermediate-advanced level of proficiency for a range of communicative activities. Secondly, the communicative tasks were selected in keeping with the likes and interests of a relatively homogeneous group of participants, namely young female learners.

The procedure was used once a year over four consecutive years from 2005 to 2008. Each year different versions of the same tasks were employed in order to ensure both the comparability of samples and the maintenance, at least in part, of the novelty effect for each administration. One of the unique features of this protocol is indeed its possibility of being used for longitudinal studies where, on the one hand, it is important to collect data at each session that is comparable with that collected in previous sessions, but, on the other hand, it is necessary to avoid the effects of repetition of the same task carried out several times. The risk is not just a possible decline in motivation due to boredom but also that, through repetition of the same task, performance differs due to the effect of automatization, as Bygate (2001) has empirically demonstrated. In 2005 and 2008, the same tasks were used: such a distance of time reduced the risk of there being an effect due to the repetition of the test, and a longitudinal comparison between identical tasks was, thus, possible.

The procedure requires two sessions on two different days. The first session involves traditional methods used in research on second language acquisition and

includes tasks that are primarily monologic in nature so as to enable comparison with other studies. The second session involves more interactive procedures. As has been stated, the line between monologic and dialogic activities may be blurred, and even in more inherently monologic situations, such as the interview or the description of a film, there may be moments of interaction, in some cases quite substantial ones. For this reason, we classify the different tasks as 'primarily monologic' or 'primarily dialogic.'

The range of tasks presented allows us to systematically control for a series of independent variables with potential sociolinguistic significance:

- the interlocutor being of the same age as the participants or an older adult
- the interlocutor being known or not known to the participants, whether of the same age or an older adult
- the interlocutor being a native speaker (NS) or non-native speaker (NNS)
- the interaction taking place over the telephone or face to face (f-t-f)
- the communicative task being monologic or interactive in nature
- the presence or absence of visual contact between the speakers
- the presence or absence of visual stimuli
- the types of linguistic-communicative functions requested.

Primarily monologic tasks

Interview

The interview as a research tool has traditionally been used for collecting samples of semi-spontaneous spoken language. In this protocol, the interview is the first activity presented to the participants, and its goal is to make the speaker comfortable, thereby allowing her to get to know the person who will serve as a guide in the tasks which follow.

The interviewer introduces herself to the participant, explains briefly which activities the participant will be asked to carry out, and starts up an informal conversation following a rather detailed written outline that allows her to guide the conversation so as to touch upon several key thematic areas established beforehand. The participant is invited to talk about herself, her family, her habits, her home country, her experience in the host country, and so forth. The outline allows for a similar format to be maintained across interviews, which thereby ensures some degree of comparability across the productions of different speakers and among the productions of the same speaker over time. For each annual survey, it is advisable that the role of interviewer be taken on by a different person in order

to ensure the naturalness of the situation and a genuine interest on the part of the person asking the questions.

This type of research tool is designed to stimulate an unplanned narration in the context of a face-to-face interaction between a native and a non-native speaker. The main linguistic functions addressed in the interview include introductions, description of personal events in the present and the past, expression of opinions, and planning of future events.

Picture – story telling

The learner is asked to tell the interviewer a story from a picture book, with which the interviewer is unfamiliar. This helps to ensure the naturalness of the situation and a genuine interest on the part of the listener and thereby avoids her inadvertently guiding or influencing the narration. Before beginning to tell the story, the learner is given some time to skim through the picture book. A time limit is not imposed for the narration, and if the learner so wishes, she can look at the book while telling the story.

The text used for the first data collection is Mercer Mayer's picture book, *Frog, Where Are You?* (1969), which has been previously used in the European Science Foundation's project *Second language acquisition by adult immigrants* (Perdue 1993) and in many other research projects (*e.g.*, Valentini 2008 for L2 Italian). The book consists of 24 pictures that recount the adventure of a boy and his dog as they search for their frog who has escaped into the woods.

Each time that this task is presented to the same person from one data collecting session to the next, it is a good idea to change the book in order to avoid the effect of repetitiveness. Other books, comparable in format, length and storyline complexity, can be used. For our project, which covered four periods of data collection, we used *One frog too many,* by Mercer and Marianna Mayer (1975) and *I Found a Robin* by Xavier Blanche (1999).

This type of research tool is designed to stimulate a planned narration that is carried out with the aid of a visual stimulus, in the context of a face-to-face interaction between native speaker and non-native speaker. The main linguistic functions involved are narration and description.

Film re-telling

The learner is asked to watch a film and to describe it to the interviewer, who has not previously seen it. This helps to ensure the naturalness of the situation and a genuine interest on the part of the listener, and thereby avoids her inadvertently

providing clues to the learner during the narration. A time limit is not imposed for the narration.

The film used for the first version of this task is a clip from *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin which has been previously used in the European Science Foundation's project *Second language acquisition by adult immigrants* (Perdue 1993) and in other research projects on L2 Italian (*e.g.*, Chini 2003). The segment entitled "Alone and Hungry" is 12 minutes long and features a plot of events involving different characters.

As with the picture book narration, each time that this task is presented to the same person from one data collecting session to the next, it is advisable to change the stimulus in order to avoid the effect of repetitiveness. Different silent films can be used, but they should have similar characteristics in terms of the number of characters, the structure of the action, and the narrative dynamics. For our project, we used two feature cartoons from the Pink Panther series: *Slink Pink* and *Pink Paradise*.

This type of research tool is designed to stimulate a planned narration that is carried out without the aid of a visual stimulus, in the context of a face-to-face interaction between native speaker and non-native speaker. The main linguistic functions in this case are narration and description.

Primarily dialogic tasks

The tasks in this second session form the different activities of a treasure hunt that is played for prizes. The participants play in pairs and follow the instructions given to them by a guide, who is the same person who conducted the interviews in the first part. The aim of this activity is to solve a puzzle and, thus, to locate the hidden treasure, which consists of prizes such as coupons for pizza or cellular telephone recharges. The words needed to solve the puzzle are given after completing the various tasks presented by the guide within the designated time limits. The treasure hunt was designed in order to make the communicative context more motivating, encourage collaboration between the pairs, and create a sense of competition among the teams.

Map task

This is one of the tasks used in the AVIP Project (Vocal Archives of Spoken Italian; http://www.parlaritaliano.it). The Map Task is a non-linguistic, co-operative task for two players. Each player is given a map, only one of which has a route marked. The task consists of transferring the designated route, as accurately as

possible, from one map to the other through verbal interaction and by avoiding visual contact. The two maps are not identical, in the sense that the number, nature and position of landmarks differ, thereby making it possible for misunderstandings to occur or difficulties to arise when exchanging information, just as can happen in real-life interactive situations. Once the task has been completed, the two players compare their maps and briefly comment on the outcome of the activity.

Our protocol includes two ways for administering this task: between a learner and the interviewer (map task #1) and between two learners (map task #2). In the first case, the learner takes on the role of *giver* and the interviewer acts as the *follower*. In the second case, the map is constructed in such a way so as to allow both players to alternatively take on both roles.

This type of task is designed to stimulate an unplanned interaction in the absence of visual contact between native speaker and non-native speaker (map task #1) and between two non-native speakers (map task #2). Among the linguistic functions highlighted in this type of interaction, there are asking for and giving directions.

Choosing a product

The participants work in pairs and are given the task of choosing a product (for example, a cellular telephone, a book, a compact disc or a digital video display disc) that has specific features. Before making their choice, participants must telephone knowledgeable peers and adults to check on the availability of the product and how much it costs in the stores. This is an open-ended decision-making task where the situation is complicated by the fact that the information needed to complete the task is not directly provided to the participants but, rather, must first be obtained by making telephone calls.

In order for the telephone interactions with knowledgeable peers and adults to maintain a good degree of spontaneity and to prevent the people contacted from immediately providing the desired information, without waiting for the requests from the participants, it is helpful to prepare the informants beforehand by telling them only vaguely about the nature of the activity in which the participants are engaged and also by using different people as informants for each pair of participants. To avoid unpleasant problems, for example, informants who do not answer the telephone, it is a good idea to recruit quite a few people, at least six for each type of informant. To encourage each participant to make a sufficient number of telephone calls, one can add the restriction that she must contact a minimum number of knowledgeable peers or adults before making a decision about the product in question. To this end, it is helpful to provide the participants with a summary chart sheet where they can record the information they gather from the telephone calls they make.

This type of task is designed to stimulate an unplanned, face-to-face interaction between non-native speakers who know each other and a native-speaking adult whom the participants do not know. It is, furthermore, designed to stimulate a semi-planned interaction over the telephone with native-speaking peers and adults who are unknown to the participants. Among the linguistic functions highlighted in these interactions, there are planning, decision making, persuading, asking for information and for advice.

Planning a trip

For this task the learners work in pairs and have to plan a trip. For instance, they can plan a four-day school trip for their class, an outing for a group of friends or for their teacher to a given location and in keeping with a specified budget. To accomplish this task, the learners have a selection of resources available to them: the guide for the game; the telephone numbers of experienced travellers, both teenagers and adults; and a list of addresses and telephone numbers for travel agencies which the learners can contact to check on the availability of hotels and the schedules for public transportation. To help the learners plan all the details of their trip, they are given a blank form to fill out. Just as with the previous task, this is an open-ended decision-making task where the information needed to complete it is not directly provided to the participants but, rather, must first be obtained by making telephone calls.

The same recommendations given previously concerning the management of knowledgeable adults hold here as well. The stores and travel agencies in the list provided to the participants must be contacted beforehand, and consent must be granted by answerers in order to audio-record some of the telephone calls that will be made in subsequent weeks. In doing so, one meets both the requirement of obtaining informed consent from the person who will be recorded and ensures that the telephone calls to be later made by the students are natural and not scripted.

As with the task previously described, this task is designed to stimulate an unplanned, face-to-face interaction between non-native speakers known to each other and a native-speaking adult unknown to the participants. It is also designed to stimulate a planned interaction over the telephone with native-speaking peers and adults and peers unknown to the participants. Among the linguistic functions highlighted in these interactions, there are planning, decision making, persuading, asking for information and for advice.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have outlined a procedure for systematically observing communicative competence that takes into account its social and situational variability. To the best of our knowledge, it is one of the most wide-ranging protocols available for the study of multilingual youth and adults (other procedures for describing communicative competence through the use of multiple tasks have been described in Perdue 1993 and Pienemann 1998). Despite its relative breadth, however, the data samples gathered for each participant are around two or two-and-a-half hours in length per year: much more data than is usually gathered in research on second language acquisition, apart from ethnographically grounded studies (which, nonetheless, raise other issues in terms of data reliability and comparability), and yet still very little compared to the entire range of situations of language use that a person confronts.

With data samples of this size, one can make some observations about how language use varies in different activities, across different situations and with different interlocutors. Naturally, one cannot study the variability in *all* activities, across *all* situations and with *all* interlocutors. Our data sampling, as with all data sampling, is necessarily partial. What matters is that one establishes the ideal dimension for the sample in light of the research goals and the research questions. It is not just a methodological concern but also a theoretical one, and is related directly to how the construct of 'competence' is defined in the research.

In defining competence as *knowledge* of a structure, to be kept altogether separate from its actual *use* in communicative practices, a procedure such as the one described here is irrelevant because performance data are irrelevant or, at the very least, only indirectly relevant for purposes of defining the boundaries of competence. Moreover, if the goal of the research is to study the core of a language system, many of the aspects of variation that can be measured using the procedure described here may fall outside of the core as they may be said to belong to the periphery of the system.

On the other hand, even in approaches to multilingual competence that are based on linguistic production data, there may be different views concerning the role of variability. Pienemann (1998), for example, proposes the "steadiness hypothesis," which states that if a learner knows how to use a particular linguistic structure in one context, then he or she knows how to use it across all contexts. Different communicative situations may foster greater or lesser "density" in the structure of the data but, according to Pienemann, there are no 'rules' *per se* which work in some contexts and not in others. Still, even to test this hypothesis,

it would be necessary to collect data from multiple contexts of use. In an approach such as Tarone's (1988) "capability continuum" (she explicitly avoids using the term 'competence'), comparison of performance on different tasks, instead, becomes a central methodological aspect for demonstrating how they systematically influence linguistic productions.

Notions of competence and performance, language and its use in communicative practices, centre and periphery of language systems, the relationship between language system and general communicative ability and, more broadly, psychological and social ability, are thus anything but unproblematic. Even in the case presented here, as with the other chapters in this volume, the problem arises as to setting the limits and the boundaries of what we call 'language' or 'communication'. The answer of not even trying to set limits, of seeing everything as connected with everything else in a system of infinite complexity, would be a legitimate one both theoretically and philosophically, but at the same time it would prove to be of little or no use for empirical research and its practical applications. Perhaps we might even do away with terms such as *language* and *communication*, *competence* and *performance*, but in any case they will be replaced by others because without drawing such distinctions, it is impossible to talk about anything. Therefore, it is important to pursue research on the variability of linguistic systems in multilingual individuals, taking into consideration as many social and communicative factors as possible and as many dimensions of analysis as possible, in order to provide a complex and nuanced (rather than a vague and blurred) picture of what constitutes their competence.

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