

# DEFINING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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***Summary** - There is a high level of agreement among theoreticians today on the basic content of the definition of communicative competence. However, it has been often pointed out in the literature on language testing that before undertaking research on communicative competence it is essential to examine and clearly determine the construct of communicative competence, namely, to formulate a definition which will enable a simple operationalization of that construct.*

*This paper presents in brief the process of defining communicative competence which started in the late 1960s. Several important definitions and models of communicative competence are presented in two separate sections. On the basis of these definitions and models, there is a discussion in the final section on the manner of defining communicative competence which is relevant for the scientific research project «English in Croatia».*

***Key words:** communicative competence, definition of communicative competence, models of communicative competence*

## **1. Concept of communicative competence**

The term «communicative competence» is comprised of two words, the combination of which means «competence to communicate». This simple lexico-semantic analysis uncovers the fact that the central word in the syntagm «communicative competence» is the word «competence».

«Competence» is one of the most controversial terms in the field of general and applied linguistics. Its introduction to linguistic discourse has been generally

associated with Chomsky who in his very influential book «Aspects of the Theory of Syntax» drew what has been today viewed as a classic distinction between competence (the monolingual speaker-listener's knowledge of language) and performance (the actual use of language in real situations)<sup>1</sup>.

Soon after Chomsky proposed and defined the concepts of competence and performance, advocates for a communicative view in applied linguistics (e.g. Savignon, 1972) expressed their strong disapproval at the idea of using the concept of idealized, purely linguistic competence as a theoretical ground of the methodology for learning, teaching and testing languages. They found the alternative to Chomsky's concept of competence in Hymes's communicative competence<sup>2</sup> which they believed to be a broader and more realistic notion of competence. Namely, Hymes (1972) defined communicative competence not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky's linguistic view of competence.

During the 1970s and 1980s many applied linguists with a primary interest in the theory of language acquisition and/or the theory of language testing gave their valuable contribution to the further development of the concept of communicative competence. Just a few of them will be mentioned in the following, namely those whose theoretical reflections and empirical work seem to have had the most important impact on the theory of communicative competence.

In an attempt to clarify the concept of communicative competence, Widdowson (1983) made a distinction between competence and capacity. In his definition of these two notions he applied insights that he gained in discourse analysis and pragmatics. In this respect, he defined competence, i.e. communicative competence, in terms of the knowledge of linguistic and sociolinguistic conventions. Under capacity, which he often referred to as procedural or communicative capacity, he understood the ability to use knowledge as means of creating meaning in a language. According to him, ability is not a component of competence. It does not turn into competence, but remains "an active force for continuing creativity", i.e. a force for the realization of what Halliday called the "meaning potential" (Widdowson, 1983:27). Having defined communicative competence in this way, Widdowson is said to be the first who in his reflections on the relationship between competence and performance gave more attention to performance or real language use.

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<sup>1</sup> According to many general and applied linguists, Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance is based on the fundamental linguistic distinction between *langue* and *parole* which was made by de Saussure.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell and Wales (1970) were among the first who used the term communicative competence. In their article "The Study of Language Acquisition" they refer to it as "competence 2" or the strong version of competence. However, from their elaboration on this notion it is not quite clear what they mean by it. Therefore we join the opinion of Cazden (1996) that Hymes was the father of the notion of communicative competence because he defined it fully, clearly and explicitly.

Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) understood communicative competence as a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skill needed for communication. In their concept of communicative competence, knowledge refers to the (conscious or unconscious) knowledge of an individual about language and about other aspects of language use. According to them, there are three types of knowledge: knowledge of underlying grammatical principles, knowledge of how to use language in a social context in order to fulfil communicative functions and knowledge of how to combine utterances and communicative functions with respect to discourse principles. In addition, their concept of skill refers to how an individual can use the knowledge in actual communication. According to Canale (1983), skill requires a further distinction between underlying capacity and its manifestation in real communication, that is to say, in performance<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike Hymes, Canale and Swain or even Widdowson, Savignon (1972, 1983) put a much greater emphasis on the aspect of ability in her concept of communicative competence. Namely, she described communicative competence as «the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors” (Savignon, 1972:8). According to her, and many other theoreticians (e.g. Canale and Swain, 1980; Skehan, 1995, 1998; Bachman and Palmer, 1996 etc.), the nature of communicative competence is not static but dynamic, it is more interpersonal than intrapersonal and relative rather than absolute. It is also largely defined by context<sup>4</sup>. As to the distinction between competence and performance, Savignon referred to competence as an underlying ability and to performance as an open manifestation of competence. In her opinion, competence can be observed, developed, maintained and evaluated only through performance. Like many theoreticians in the field of language learning and teaching (e.g. Stern, 1986), Savignon equates communicative competence with language proficiency. Due to this, as well as to the controversial use of the term «competence», Taylor (1988) proposed to replace the term «communicative competence» with the term «communicative proficiency». At approximately the same time and for similar reasons, Bachman (1990) suggested using the term «communicative language ability», claiming that this term combines in itself the meanings of both language proficiency and communicative competence. Leaning especially on Hymes, Widdowson and Candlin, Bachman defined communicative language ability as a concept comprised of knowledge or competence and capacity for appropriate use of knowledge in a contextual communicative language use. In elaborating on this definition, Bachman devoted spe-

<sup>3</sup> Canale (1983) as well as Canale and Swain (1980) pointed at the importance of making distinction between communicative competence and communicative performance, that is to say, actual performance which is the term Canale used in order to avoid (negative) connotations with Chomsky’s concept of performance.

<sup>4</sup> Stern (1986) and Spolsky (1990) added the ability for creative language use to the list of characteristics of the nature of communicative competence.

cial attention to the aspect of language use - that is, the way how language is used for the purpose of achieving a particular communicative goal in a specific situational context of communication.

## **2. Models of communicative competence**

Recent theoretical and empirical research on communicative competence is largely based on three models of communicative competence: the model of Canale and Swain, the model of Bachman and Palmer and the description of components of communicative language competence in the Common European Framework (CEF).

The theoretical framework/model which was proposed by Canale and Swain (1980, 1981) had at first three main components, i.e. fields of knowledge and skills: grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence. In a later version of this model, Canale (1983, 1984) transferred some elements from sociolinguistic competence into the fourth component which he named discourse competence.

In Canale and Swain (1980, 1981), grammatical competence is mainly defined in terms of Chomsky's linguistic competence, which is why some theoreticians (e.g. Savignon, 1983), whose theoretical and/or empirical work on communicative competence was largely based on the model of Canale and Swain, use the term «linguistic competence» for «grammatical competence». According to Canale and Swain, grammatical competence is concerned with mastery of the linguistic code (verbal or non-verbal) which includes vocabulary knowledge as well as knowledge of morphological, syntactic, semantic, phonetic and orthographic rules. This competence enables the speaker to use knowledge and skills needed for understanding and expressing the literal meaning of utterances.

In line with Hymes's belief about the appropriateness of language use in a variety of social situations, the sociolinguistic competence in their model includes knowledge of rules and conventions which underlie the appropriate comprehension and language use in different sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts.

Canale (1983, 1984) described discourse competence as mastery of rules that determine ways in which forms and meanings are combined to achieve a meaningful unity of spoken or written texts. The unity of a text is enabled by cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. Cohesion is achieved by the use of cohesion devices (e.g. pronouns, conjunctions, synonyms, parallel structures etc.) which help to link individual sentences and utterances to a structural whole. The means for achieving coherence, for instance repetition, progression, consistency, relevance of ideas etc., enable the organisation of meaning, i.e. establish a logical relationship between groups of utterances.

In the model of Canale and Swain, strategic competence is composed of knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that are recalled to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to insufficient competence in

one or more components of communicative competence. These strategies include paraphrase, circumlocution, repetition, reluctance, avoidance of words, structures or themes, guessing, changes of register and style, modifications of messages etc. Canale (1983) pointed out that this competence can also be used to enhance the effectiveness of communication. In a qualitative sense, it is different from the other three components of communicative competence in that it is not a type of stored knowledge and it includes non-cognitive aspects such as self-confidence, readiness to take risks etc. However, since it interacts with other components, it enables learners to deal successfully with a lack of competence in one of the fields of competence.

Despite the simplicity of the model of Canale and Swain, this model has dominated the fields of second and foreign language acquisition and language testing for more than a decade. Moreover, the tendency to use this model, or refer to it, has remained even after Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) proposed a much more comprehensive model of communicative competence. The easiness with which the model of Canale and Swain can be applied is probably the main reason why many researchers of communicative competence still use it.

Taking into consideration the results of prior theoretical and empirical research, in the late 1980s, Bachman proposed a new model of communicative competence or, more precisely, the model of communicative language ability. That model was, however, slightly altered by Bachman and Palmer in the mid 1990s.

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), many traits of language users such as some general characteristics, their topical knowledge, affective schemata and language ability influence the communicative language ability. The crucial characteristic is their language ability which is comprised of two broad areas – language knowledge and strategic competence.

Language knowledge consists of two main components - organisational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge which complement each other in achieving communicatively effective language use. The subcomponents of these two areas of knowledge are listed in Figure 1.

In Bachman and Palmer's model, organisational knowledge is composed of abilities engaged in a control over formal language structures, i.e. of grammatical and textual knowledge. Grammatical knowledge includes several rather independent areas of knowledge such as knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology, and graphology. They enable recognition and production of grammatically correct sentences as well as comprehension of their propositional content. Textual knowledge enables comprehension and production of (spoken or written) texts. It covers the knowledge of conventions for combining sentences or utterances into texts, i.e. knowledge of cohesion (ways of marking semantic relationships among two or more sentences in a written text or utterances in a conversation) and knowledge of rhetorical organisation (way of developing narrative texts, descriptions, comparisons, classifications etc.) or conversational organisation (conventions for initiating, maintaining and closing conversations).

Pragmatic knowledge refers to abilities for creating and interpreting discourse. It includes two areas of knowledge: knowledge of pragmatic conventions for expressing acceptable language functions and for interpreting the illocutionary power of utterances or discourse (functional knowledge) and knowledge of sociolinguistic conventions for creating and interpreting language utterances which are appropriate in a particular context of language use (sociolinguistic knowledge).

Strategic knowledge is conceived in the model as a set of metacognitive components which enable language user involvement in goal setting, assessment of communicative sources, and planning. Goal setting includes identifying a set of possible tasks, choosing one or more of them and deciding whether or not to attempt to complete them. Assessment is a means by which language use context is related to other areas of communicative language ability: topical knowledge and affective schemata. Planning involves deciding how to make use of language knowledge and other components involved in the process of language use to complete the chosen task successfully.

At the end of this illustrative description of Bachman and Palmer's model of communicative language ability, one cannot but conclude that this model is more complex, more comprehensive and much clearer than the model of Canale and Swain. It is preferable because of its detailed and at the same time very organisational description of basic components of communicative competence.

The last model we will refer to is the model or description of communicative language competence in the CEF (2001), the model which is intended for assessment as well as for learning and teaching of languages.

In the CEF, communicative competence is conceived only in terms of knowledge. It includes three basic components – language competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Thus, strategic competence is not its componential part. It is interesting, however, that each component of language knowledge is explicitly defined as knowledge of its contents and ability to apply it. For instance, language competence or linguistic competence refers to knowledge of and ability to use language resources to form well structured messages. The subcomponents of language competence are lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competences. Sociolinguistic competence refers to possession of knowledge and skills for appropriate language use in a social context. The following aspects of this competence are highlighted: language elements that mark social relationships, rules of appropriate behaviour, and expressions of peoples' wisdom, differences in register and dialects and stress. The last component in this model - pragmatic competence - involves two subcomponents: discourse competence and functional competence. A part of both of these competences is the so-called planning competence which refers to sequencing of messages in accordance with interactional and transactional schemata. Strategic competence is mentioned in the part the CEF dedicated to a discussion of communicative language use. This competence is conceived as strategy use in the broad-

est sense. Thus, the stress is put not only on the use of communication strategies which can help to overcome the lack in a particular area of language knowledge but on the use of all types of communication strategies. As to the authors of the CEF, the use of strategies can be compared with the application of metacognitive principles (planning, achieving, controlling and correcting) on different forms of language activity: reception, interaction, production and meditating.

At the end of this chapter, the similarities and differences in the componential structure of the three models of communicative competence described above - the model of Canale and Swain, the model of Bachman and Palmer and the model proposed in the CEF – are presented in a graphic illustration.

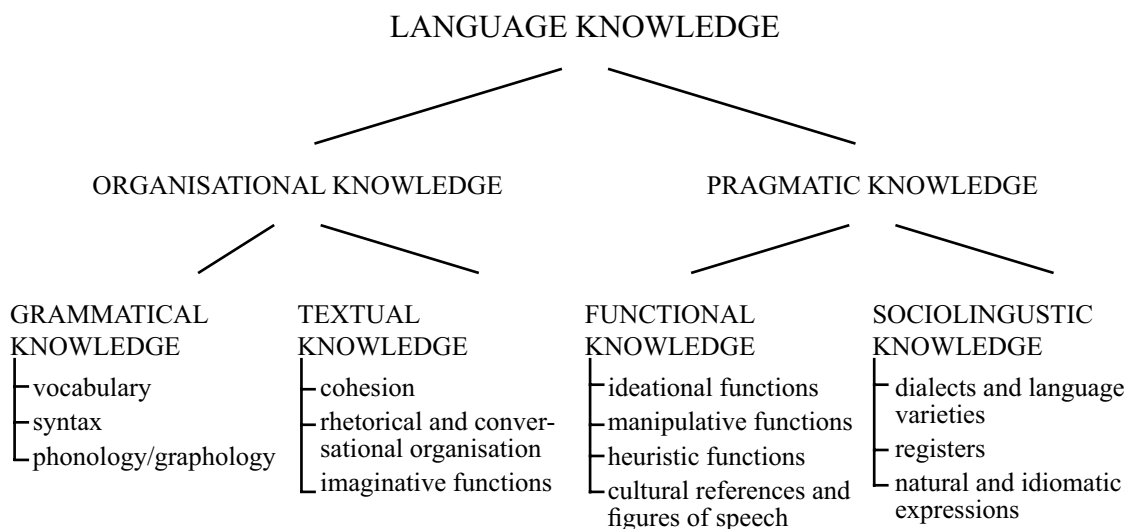
### 3. Conclusion

The short outline of the development of the concept and models of communicative competence made in the first two chapters of this article enables the following conclusions relevant for the project «English in Croatia»:

1. From the moment of its introduction into the linguistic discourse, the notion of communicative competence has been constantly changed and adapted to the context of its use. This process was accompanied by a change in the originally used term. Thus, instead of the term «communicative competence», the use of some other terms that either coexisted at that time or were completely new were proposed and subsequently used, for instance language proficiency, communicative proficiency, communicative language ability, communicative language competence etc. Nevertheless, their definitions were very close in meaning to the definition of communicative competence, i.e. all those terms were defined as knowledge and abilities/skills for use. This shows that theoreticians, especially those in the field of applied linguistics, after years of theoretical and empirical research on communicative competence have reached an agreement that a competent language user should possess not only knowledge about language but also the ability and skill to activate that knowledge in a communicative event. However, while it is relatively simple to define, observe and evaluate the basic knowledge that makes the concept of communicative competence (for details see J.Mihaljević Djigunović and V. Bagarić this issue), it is not that simple to understand, describe and evaluate the ability for use. It has been assumed that the ability for use refers to the application of different cognitive processes and affective factors in language use (Skehan, 1998). Since its work in the communicative language use and their influence on successful communication is difficult to research, there is still an insufficient amount of knowledge about them. Consequently, the answers about the content of ability for use, its relationship to the components of knowledge and factors in real language use have still been looked for in both theoretical and empirical field of research. The answers to these questions will provide a better understanding of the

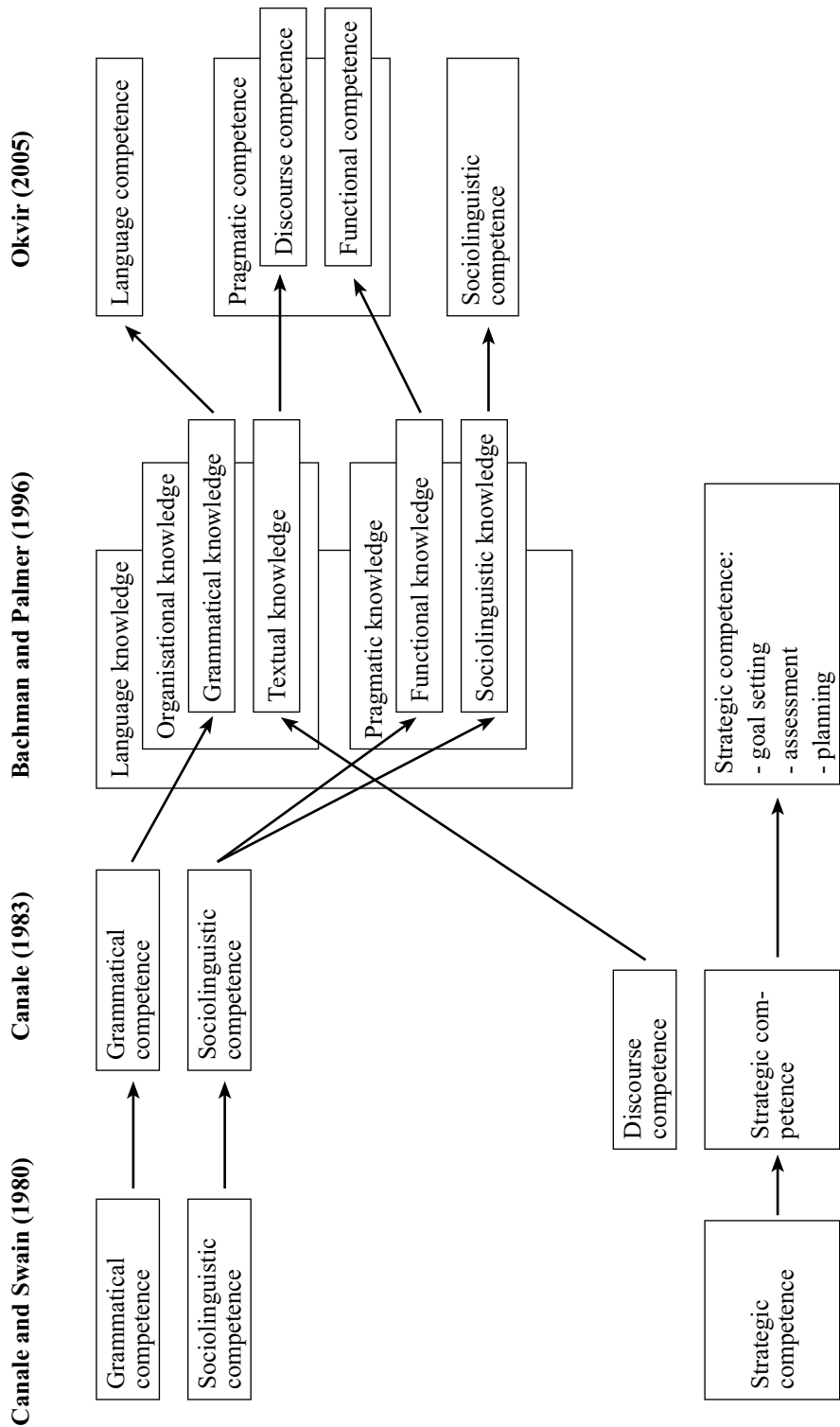
relationship between competence and performance which has to be looked into from both a psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspective (Skehan, 1998). Despite the insufficient insights into the concept of communicative competence, there is almost unanimous agreement among scientists that, first, the conclusions about communicative competence of learners will be and should be drawn by observing and testing their communicative performance, and secondly, that it is not necessary, and practically impossible, to measure all components of communicative competence, i.e. communicative performance that are stated in the theory. These beliefs have been taken into account in the process of outlining the scientific research on communicative competence of learners of English and German in the project «English in Croatia».

- As illustrated in Figure 2, there is a striking similarity in the conceptualization of communicative competence between three models that are frequently used at present. Due to this, the project «English Language in Croatia» is founding the construct which will be measured not only on one model of communicative competence but taking into account the contents of all these models, especially the model of Bachman and Palmer and the model of communicative language competence proposed in the CEF. Furthermore, it has been decided that the components of communicative competence (grammatical, textual, functional and sociolinguistic) described in the models will be measured either as isolated or integrated competences, depending on the activity – e.g. activity of listening, reading, speaking and writing - the language tasks involve. The article on methodology of the research undertaken within the project «English in Croatia» deals in much more detail with how the components of communicative competence were operationalized in the research.



**Figure 1.** Areas of language knowledge (Source: Bachman and Palmer, 1996:68)





**Figure 2.** Similarities and differences between several models of communicative competence

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