Identifying Linguistic Competence

What Linguistic Competence Consists in

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Abstract

Linguistic competence, language, a language and speech acts constitute realities to be found in speaking. They all are nothing but aspects of the same reality, the activity of speaking created and executed by human subjects who are free and creative, absolute and contingent, transcendent and historical. Since speaking is something known by speakers even before the performance what linguistic competence is can only be guessed out through self-reflection and verification of it in the verbal behavior of speakers.

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1. The Human Being and Language, Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt

Modern linguistics started with Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), who was a philologist, statesman, philosopher, anthropologist, naturalist, minister and ambassador. He was the first thinker who posed the problem of language in speakers. The most interesting aspect of his attitude is that he did not aim at describing language but finding out what the human nature and his peculiarities ("the human spirit", Geist in his words) were.

His figure appears in the history of thought as an enigma because of several reasons. The character of his linguistic project; the fragmentary character of his work; his proposal of interpreting language (*hermeneutics,* the explanation of language in terms of different disciplines) instead of describing it; his neglect for studying language as the result of necessary laws of cause and effect similar to the laws ruling in natural sciences; his own identity; the diversity of his work; the precise disciplinary location of his work; and particularly the innovative character of his contribution made his thought unintelligible for longer than a century. The bases of his thought are Leibniz and Kant (Di Cesare, 1999: 16). Humboldt's main interest is the study of man and his nature not only empirically but

speculatively as well. Under this double point of view his purpose is not to study language but to understand the spiritual development of "Mankind". He selected language as the most important human activity in which the human spirit manifests itself (Di Cesare, 1999: ch. II). To achieve this purpose Humboldt proposed making a *hermeneutics* of language, a discipline to be conceived as the point where different disciplines cross and interconnect with one another coordinated purposefully with self-reflection on Man. Humboldt's linguistic project is to be defined as a philosophical-transcendental reflection on Man to be verified empirically in language.

Humboldt anticipated the difficulty implicit in the study of language. Language is not any object the definition of which can be made scientifically. A scientific definition of language should be based on two assumptions: a) the object of study should be determinable in its entirety, and b) science should posses the infinite capacity of determining objects objectively, that is, the capacity of going beyond the individual and historical conditions in which the definition should be made. These assumptions involve defining language through its objectification. But language escapes both conditions. Language is a living reality and it is essentially dynamic, that is, *enérgeia* (Humboldt, 1990: 65). The objectification of language is necessary only to study it but contrary to the reality of it.

Humboldt poses the problem of linguistics in the speech act: language is ephemeral always and at any moment (Humboldt, 1990: 64). Language exists only at the moment of speaking thus resisting all types of conceptual definitions (=objectification). The only possible way of accessing linguistics in its essence is through *metaphors*. A metaphor manifests itself as an open interpretation thus preventing it from assuming fixed forms (Di Cesare, 1999: ch. III). It is necessary then to analyze the variety of language manifesting itself in the human world under the philosophical point of view and examine it under the historical point of view. Humboldt's reflection then is an anthropological approach to be understood as the study of individual phenomenological forms in which the human spirit is displayed. Under this point of view Humboldt's anthropological criticism leads philosophy to a new way of philosophizing at the same time transcendental and empirical.

Putting anthropology and philosophy together aims at interpreting "Geist", the spirit thus constituting the genuine object of pure philosophy. This interpretation answers the attempt of Humboldt of overcoming the Kantian split between nature (*sensibility* or *receptivity*) and reason (*intellect* or *spontaneity*). The spirit remarks its indissoluble connection with sensibility. This connection explains why the spirit can only be apprehended in the empirical variety of its individual manifestations. Hence the primacy of the individual over the universal, the deepest and peculiar principle in Humboldt's philosophy (Di Cesare, 1999: 25-26). Language constitutes the center in which all fields of reflection at the same time transcendental and empirical converge. Language is the genuine manifestation of the human spirit manifesting itself in creativity. Consequently the study of Man relates to linguistics since linguistics constitutes the key to penetrate the human nature (Di Cesare, 1999: 26-28). Language is an organ (a metaphor, in Humboldt's words) deeply rooted in the very physics of Man. Because of this it is internal, original and natural to the being of Man. It is born as an instinct (another metaphor) starting with the necessity of Man of making himself and creating the world in a nexus of consonance with other men (Humboldt, 1990: 24).

Language plays the mediating function between the I and the world. This function is not merely a relationship with the world. For a man having a world means separating himself from the things surrounding him thus setting himself in opposition to it. This opposition constitutes the first act of reflection. As a natural object a man is originally linked to the world. For a human being this link to the world constitutes the possibility of knowledge: the link is broken when a man opposes things determining himself as a subject. This act of reflection, necessary for the constitution of the I and the world is a speech act:

So then language starts immediately and at the same time as the first act of reflection; the word is present in the very moment in which man wakes up to auto-conscience from the bluntness of appetite in which the subject devours the object. It represents the first stimulus a man gives himself to stop suddenly, look round and orientate himself (Humboldt cited in Di Cesare, 1999: 33, my translation).

For Kant, when a man discovers the world surrounding him he re-arranges it. This is the first act of self-reflection of man, the Copernican revolution of Kant. But this act of self-reflection is not possible unless through language, the Copernican revolution of Humboldt (Di Cesare, 1999: 35-36). And in this we can see the description of the present theory of knowledge followed by Ortega y Gasset, Coseriu, Heidegger and many others since the twentieth century when Humboldt was first understood.

In the formation of concepts subjective-ness penetrates the object and thus it is transferred to it. Out of this process of synthesis there sprouts a "subjective representation" (Humboldt 1990: 76 and ff.). For this representation to become a concept it must be *objectified*, something impossible to occur unless through language. Language is the necessary condition for knowledge to be. This model alters the traditional model of knowledge: the relation subject-object. With the objectifying function there are three dimensions in the act of knowing: (a) the dimension subject-object, (b) the dimension subject-subject and (c) the objectifying function through language (Di Cesare, 1999: 38.).

The objectifying function appears only when the I can perceive its subjective representation really objectified from the outside only through the intervention of the You. Only when the word created by the I reverberates in the You, that is, when the sound is given back to the ear of the listener, the subjective representation is translated into something objectively real without being deprived of its original subjectivity (Humboldt, 1990: 77). Because of a You the subjective representation is made into a concept by means of language. The You then is indispensable for the development of thinking. This can also be demonstrated in the fact that the individual subject when he retires to his most intimate solitude in the act of thinking speaks to him himself as if he was another one (Di Cesare, 1999: 38).

Speaking is based on dialogue. Speaking is speaking to others; thinking is thinking with others, and even being a human being is being together with others. Language thus constitutes the foundation and basis of the human social condition thus revealing the sociability of humans. Language is at the crossroads of subjectivity and objectivity, passing from subjectivity to objectivity and from the ever-limited individuality of man to the existence of the whole including everything at the same time (Di Cesare, 1999: 39).

The semiotic structure of the word is reflected in the mediating function performed by

language between the senses (sensibility, receptivity) and the intellect (spontaneity). The word is at the same time an image (symbol) and a sign. Because it is an image the word is characterized with the mode of the synthesis produced. As a symbol the word is both sensitive and spiritual, two characteristics identifying with each other. The word is conceived as a unit in which idea and material substance coincide (Di Cesare, 1999: 42). In the word both elements the sensitive and the material do not have existence but in the unity they form. In the word the sound and the concept form a unit thus constituting a unique essence (Di Cesare, 1999: 42-43). The semiotic structure of the word is constituted with the synthesis of reflection and articulation. In the word the sound constituting it and its production reveals its materiality reduced to a minimum thus emphasizing the harmony of sound and thought (Humboldt, 1990: 74). In the word articulation reveals itself iconic in respect to reflection. In this sense forming thought means articulating it by means of sound. But the harmony of articulation with reflection overcomes the harmony of sound and thought as can be seen in the language of the deaf and dumb. On the other hand, for Humboldt, the articulation of thought and sound is not analytic only but synthetic. The basic operations of articulation are separating and putting together. Both operations tend to make elementary parts into new units (Humboldt, 1990: 91). In this sense the articulation of the sound *continuum* in phonemes is at the same time the combination of these ones in new wider units (the word) that by means of analysis and synthesis form other units (the phrase and the sentence) (Di Cesare, 1999: 44-45).

The analysis of the nexus linking thought and language analyzed within the limits of philosophy considers language in its universality as a pure transcendental condition. For Humboldt, the linguistic synthesis of sensibility (or receptivity) and intellect (or spontaneity) is transcendental in so far as it is an idea but not as it is performed. The analysis of language thus is diverse. It consists in the dialectics between the universal and the individual, the faculty of speaking and the actual performance in different languages and speech. It is a process of diversification and individualization revealing itself indispensable because of the primacy of the individual over the universal. In this sense the universal does not exist unless in the individual. The spiritual force must manifest itself in the depths of individuality (Humboldt, 1990: 55). Language manifests itself in an infinite variety of individual forms, that is, particular languages. Thought depends not only on language but a particular language. This conclusion has to do with the great contribution to the history of thought by Humboldt. Linguistic diversity as a close and abstract universality of thought requests universality of thought to be made into a research not only transcendental but empirical as well, that is, verified empirically (Di Cesare, 1990: 47-48).

2. The Problem of Language in the 20th Century

Humboldt's ideas were very difficult to understand at the time when linguistics tried to make a positive science out of language particularly with comparative and evolutionary linguistics. Only with Eugenio Coseriu (1921-2002) who interpreted Humboldt in the light of Aristotle's theory Humboldt started being understood. In the twentieth century the interest for language is common to both philosophers and linguists. Contrary to Humboldt´s ideas the interest for language was not in the study of the human spirit and creativity but in language as an objectified object something external to speakers human subjects must bear with. In this

sense the original conception of language by linguists influences they way the fact of language is considered and the purposes the theory studying language aims at.

2.1 Language as an Objective Independent Reality

John L. Austin (1911-1960) considers language as something objective existing in itself, an independent reality to be considered as a natural object. The fact to be analyzed is speech acts with the purpose of finding out if saying, that is, using language is doing something. The meaning of speech acts is the connection between the form of expression and the intention of the speaker (Austin, 1988: 7-35) Austin thus introduced the intention of speakers in the study of language.

For John R. Searle (1932), language constitutes a social fact of communication, something objective, based on the executive nature of the human being functioning in society in accordance with rules of behavior. In consonance with this "a theory of language is part of a theory of action simply because speaking is a rule-governed form of behaviour" (Searle, 1969: 17). Language is executed in speech acts in as much as these ones represent the execution of something objective: "The unit of linguistic communication is not, […], the symbol, word or sentence, […], but rather the production or issuance of the symbol, word or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (Searle, 1969: 16). In this sense, "an adequate study of speech acts is a study of *langue*" (Searle, 1969: 17). Based on the intuition of speakers they can conclude that if a particular speaker has command on the dialect he speaks he will be entitled to hypothetically domineer the mechanisms of language (Searle, 1969: 13). The speech act is made in three parts: "a) Uttering words, that is, performing utterance acts; b) Referring and predicating, that is, performing propositional acts; c) Stating, questioning, commanding, promising, that is, performing *illocutionary acts* (Searle, 1969: 24). The meaning of expressions is given in the illocutionary force of a proposition; the sense consists in the fact of identifying a referent: "In the total illocutionary act the content is the proposition; the function is the illocutionary force with which the proposition is presented. In the act of identifying reference the content is the sense of identifying description associated with the utterance of the referring expression" (Searle, 1969: 125).

Umberto Eco (1932-2016) conceives language as a fact of communication, a social phenomenon. Eco starts with what he calls *a semiotic field*. His research is centered in culture. As a science semiotics deals with hypotheses about what Eco calls *meaningful in communication*: all forms of communication function as the utterance of pieces of information based on *underlying codes*. Eco defines what a form of communication is and which are those underlying codes. All acts of communicative performance are based on a pre-existent competence. In other words, all acts of *parôle* involve a *langue* (Eco, 1972: 15-16). The research of semiotics must deal with those systems of communication appearing as more "natural" and spontaneous with lesser influence of culture (Eco, 1972: 16). All types of culture must be considered as the manifestation of communication and all aspects of a particular culture must be considered as contents of communication (Eco, 1972: 33-34). Hence that all systems of meaning be considered structures (*semiotic fields* or *semantic axes*) performing the rules of meaningful forms (Eco, 1972: 37-38). So then, for Eco, communication encompasses the different types of culture manifesting themselves objectively in *semiotic fields* or *semantic axes*.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) conceives language with an *instrumental* function. Philosophical problems surge as misunderstandings and confusion in language use. It is important *to understand ordinary language*. The study of ordinary language thus aims at achieving a unique purpose, avoiding misunderstanding in order to solve philosophical problems (Carrió & Rabossi: 24). Language in this sense is nothing worth being studied in itself.

2.2 Language, the Expression of Social Signs

Ferdinand De Saussure (1857–1913) whose aim was explaining *the meaning of social signs* conceived language as something *objective* and thus as something to be analyzed out of the conscience of speakers. Language thus was *unconscious* and dependent on what he called *the mass of speakers*.

Ferdinand de Saussure emphasized the importance of structural knowledge in speakers. He established three pairs of distinctions, language-form (*language is form* not substance); *langue-parôle* (the language system vs. the language actually spoken, *speech*) and *synchrony-diachrony*. Synchrony has to do with *the state of a language*, the technique of speaking in a particular period of time encompassing sets of forms, contents, rules and procedures. And diachrony has to do with the point of view of language change thus dealing with the study of the evolution of a language. The peculiarity in De Saussure's conception is that both synchrony and diachrony were to be distinguished in the execution of language, that is, in *la langue*. Because of this he identifies *la langue* with synchrony and speech, *la parôle* with diachrony. Language, *langage,* was constituted with what he called *la langue* encompassing the language system and thus belonging to synchrony and *la parôle*, speech, thus constituting a deviation of the language system. That is, for Saussure, *la langue* was conceived as knowledge at the level of the particular language and *la parôle* was conceived under the point of view of the activity performed in speaking. For De Saussure, the distinction between *la langue* and *la parôle* interweave with each other (Coseriu, 1992: 89). With this conception in mind when he found out different forms in different states of a particular language, that is, when he found out facts of evolution, he could not explain the continuity in the activity of speaking in the different states of a language involved. He thought of language as the language system and for him the language system was immutable. He found out the concept of structure, applied it to a particular language, *la langue*, and neglected the continuity of language across time (Coseriu, 1988, 260-276). The following paragraph gives the reason of De Saussure's conception about language,

La langue is not free because time will permit social forces acting in it to develop its effects and reach the principle of continuity thus annulling freedom. But continuity necessarily involves the alteration, the more or less considerable displacement of relationships (De Saussure, 1974: 145, my translation).

So for De Saussure, language change occurred off the language system but was accepted in the language system. For Coseriu, De Saussure accepted language change in the so-called *synchronic projection* (Coseriu, 1988, 13-14). In consonance with this De Saussure established some queer equivalences: *speech=diachrony; langue=synchrony*; and *langue=speech=in synchronic projection* (Coseriu, 1988, 24). For De Saussure, linguistic competence was the (structural) knowledge of speakers to speak, that is, the knowledge of the

language system (*la langue*) being executed in speech (*la parôle*).

2.3 Language and Psychology

Linguistics in North America is characterized by three important features: a) language is objective, b) it is based on something larger, psychology or the mind, but c) the theory of psychology adopted is different in every case thus focusing on different realities.

The connection of American linguists with psychology differs depending on the different authors. For Sapir (1884-1939), language is influenced by social psychology and at the same time language influences social psychology. For Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949), language is based on the behavior of speakers. The speech act is the response to a stimulus coming to the speaker from the outside. For Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), who openly rejects the connection of language and the great majority of theories in psychology, bases the existence of language on the higher mind, the world of the unconscious the same for all men in the world, and the lower mind constituting the world of reasoning, language, music and the conscious. These two realities constitute the deepest layer of psychology since the mind constitutes something structural in human beings (Whorf, 1956: 257-259). But at the same time Whorf adheres to Gestalt theory interpreting it as a theory of knowledge (Whorf, 1956: 42; 208; 216; 221; 240-242). And finally Noam Chomsky (1928-) who thinks of different conceptions of psychology language is based on. Language depends on the human psychology (*Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, 1965); the psychology of knowledge (*Reflections on Language*, 1972); or a branch of the psychology of the mind (*On Nature and Language,* 2002). In 1968 Chomsky gave the Whidden Lectures later on published in *Reflections on Language* using a new concept to refer to the fact that humans have beliefs in the conception of things manifest in their daily life. In this sense beliefs are unconscious. To refer to this reality he used the name *cognition*. Later on other linguists adopted the name of *cognitive* and *cognition* defending that language is based on cognition because it is a cognitive faculty just as others (cf. Lakoff, 1990: 113; 180; 291; Langacker, 1991, I). Chomsky on the other hand in 2000 proposed considering language as a natural object, the *naturalistic approach* (*New Horizons on Language and Mind*); and finally in 2002 (*On Nature and Language*) he proposed basing language on the brain.

In 1965 in the so-called standard theory Chomsky formulated linguistic competence as

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily 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 the language in actual performance (Chomsky, 1965: 3).

Linguistic competence thus is knowledge and the execution of knowledge with two levels,

We thus make a fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and *performance* (the actual use of language in concrete situations). Only under the idealization set forth […] is performance a direct reflection of competence (Chomsky, 1965: 4).

3. Speaking, the Only Reality Verified by Speakers: The Theory of Speaking by Eugenio Coseriu

As a general rule linguistics in the 20th century considers *speaking*, that is, *speech*, *parôle*, *performance*, merely as the exclusive execution of a particular language. In this sense speech, *speaking*, *the activity of speaking* belongs to a particular language (English, French, Italian, for example). Due to the complexities of speech it is usually thought that speech represents deviations or limitations in the language system. Because of this speech is not the object of study of linguistics. It is taken into consideration only in so far as it deviates from speech. The purpose of Coseriu in the formulation of his *theory of speaking* is demonstrating that linguistic competence, the knowledge of speakers to speak, includes aspects having to do with all levels included in the activity of speaking. All normal adult human beings speak. Therefore language is universal (*universal linguistic level*). Whenever language is executed in speech it is spoken in a particular language (*particular linguistic level*). And human subjects speak not collectively but individually in a particular circumstance thus creating contexts and situations (*individual linguistic level*). The identification and description of linguistic competence must include aspects having to do with the individual speaker, the situation and the context, the language being spoken, the conditions of speaking, together with influences from the biological and psycho-physical levels of human nature. For Coseriu, linguistic competence is strictly cultural. In dialogue both speakers assume the role of speaker and listener (Coseriu, 1992: 87).

With this the study of linguistic competence involves the problem of deciding which level to start with. The starting point cannot be *la langue*, *competence* but *la parôle, performance*, *the speech act*, *speech*, *speaking*. In order to study language and linguistic competence the point of interest is *la parôle, performance*, the actual execution of language, a level (the individual linguistic level) much more important than the systematization of rules describing the language system and language use (the particular linguistic level). Even more: for Coseriu, *la parôle, performance*, *hablar*, *speaking* constitutes the only possible object of study. In speaking and out of speaking all aspects of language can be extracted out of. If in language studies the linguist may speak of realities such as *competence*, *speech*, *language*, *a language*, the *language system*, etc., these realities constitute aspects extracted from *la parôle, performance*, *speaking*, *the activity of speaking, speech*. Linguistic competence then, for Coseriu, is the knowledge of speakers to speak a language involving all aspects, contexts and situations intervening in speech, avoiding concepts such as error, deviations and limitations.

In 1955/56, one year at least before Chomsky published his first work (*Syntactic Structures,* 1957) and nine before Chomsky published the formulation of his standard theory (*Aspects of the Theory of Syntax,* 1965) Coseriu proposed making up linguistics on the base of speech, that is, the execution of the activity of *speaking*. This meant a radical change in the perspective to adopt in linguistics. Notwithstanding Chomsky says that "the only concrete results that have been put forth concerning the theory of performance […] have come from studies of performance models that incorporate generative grammars" (cf. Chomsky, 1965: 10).

Language is speaking, *the activity of speaking*, a reality much wider than a language. A language in its totality is found in speaking but speaking in its entirety is not found in a

language. In order to determine the problem of linguistic competence it is necessary to start with the activity of speaking and consider speaking as the base all manifestations of language are to be extracted out of.

If the activity of speaking is really adopted as the starting point in linguistics the following set of theses will have to be accepted:

a)   The distinction between *la langue* and *la parôle*, that is, linguistic knowledge and the performance of that knowledge does not correspond with the real distinction of a language and speech. Speakers know the distinction between language and speech intuitively when they speak or when they evaluate speaking.

b)   The distinction between *competence* and *performance* cannot be considered equivalent to the distinction between *la langue* and *la parôle*, as Chomsky says (Chomsky 1965, 4). Competence is creative (=generative). *La langue* is static.

c)   A theory of linguistic competence with an objective base must start with two general verifications: first, language is (1.1) a universal human activity (1.2) that individuals as representative of communal traditions in the knowledge to speak (1.3) perform individually; and second, an activity —and consequently the activity of speaking— can be considered (2.1) as activity, (2.2) as the knowledge involved in that activity, and (2.3) as the product of that activity.

These verifications give two series of three levels and three points of view that mixing them together with one another give nine linguistic forms, that is, nine aspects in language to be singled out and described (see figure 2). These aspects have an objective base since speakers know them intuitively (Coseriu 1992: 74-75).

For Coseriu then the base to describe language and all aspects in it is *speakers* and the verification of these aspects is in speakers as well just in *the verbal behavior of speakers*.

3.1 The Distinction between la Langue and la Parôle in Saussure Does Not Have an Objective Base

For Ferdinand de Saussure, the sum of *la langue* plus *la parôle* encompasses the whole linguistic knowledge (*langage*). *La langue* relates to only the linguistic knowledge of a particular language. Those forms of linguistic knowledge independent from a particular language are not included in *la langue*, sometimes being ascribed to *la parôle*. In this sense the distinction by Saussure is asymmetric since *la parôle* encompasses much more than *la langue*. This asymmetry can be considered from both points of view. From the point of view of *la langue* the distinction encompasses the activity of speaking only (performance, execution). And from the point of view of *la parôle* this one does not include any delimitation of the execution of a particular language proper. *La parôle* in this case would be speaking or speaking in general but there would be no room for *la parôle* of English or *la parôle* of Spanish, French, German, etc.

3.2 The Particular Language between Competence and Performance

The distinction between *competence* and *performance*, that is, linguistic knowledge and the execution of that knowledge in speech relates to the actual contrast between *la langue* and *la parôle*. *Competence* cannot be considered only as competence in a particular language. The knowledge of a particular language is included in competence but competence goes beyond

the knowledge of a particular language. Competence has to do with speaking. In speaking the knowledge to speak a particular language is part of linguistic competence. In speaking the concrete language does not have a substantive existence but an adverbial one. This means that the knowledge to speak a language does not relate to an object but a mode of an activity. An activity is much wider than its mode of being.

This is something intuitively stated by speakers in expressions such as, for example, *this text is English, the Chronicle is written in Old English, he speaks Russian,* etc. That is, in these expressions it is meant an activity of speaking expressed in a particular mode of that activity. In Greek the expression to mean the language spoken was expressed with a verb, αττικίζειν, that is, to speak Attic; έλλενίζειν, to speak Greek; βαρβαρίζειν, to speak a foreign language. And in Latin the expression was even more precise, *Latine loqui, Graece loqui, loqui more Germanico,* that is, the expression relates to the mode in which the activity of speaking is performed. The expression of speaking in Latin and Greek relates much more adequately to the real problem. And this is just the starting point: in order to study language it is necessary to start with primary facts, that is, *facts of speaking*. It is necessary to identify linguistic competence in facts of the activity of speaking.

Competence encompasses much more than only a language. It is not admissible to equate competence with a particular language; or vice versa: it is not admissible to equate a particular language to the universal knowledge involved in the activity of speaking. You cannot identify, for example, the knowledge to speak English or Spanish with the knowledge to speak. The relation between competence and performance is not simply a relation between knowledge and the mechanic application of it. Speakers are creative when they speak. They go beyond the competence they apply thus creating a new competence. And these topics have to do not only with the identification or contents of competence but the nature of competence (Coseriu, 1992: 78-80).

4. A General Theory of Speaking

So then the starting point in order to make a theory of linguistic competence is not a particular language but the activity of speaking. From this point of view any kind of linguistics is *linguistics of speaking*. Even when you study a particular aspect of a language (say, English morphology or French syntax or even the history of a particular language) you have to study the activity of speaking under the mode of speaking English, French or Russian. In order to understand what linguistic competence is it is necessary to represent the following diagram.
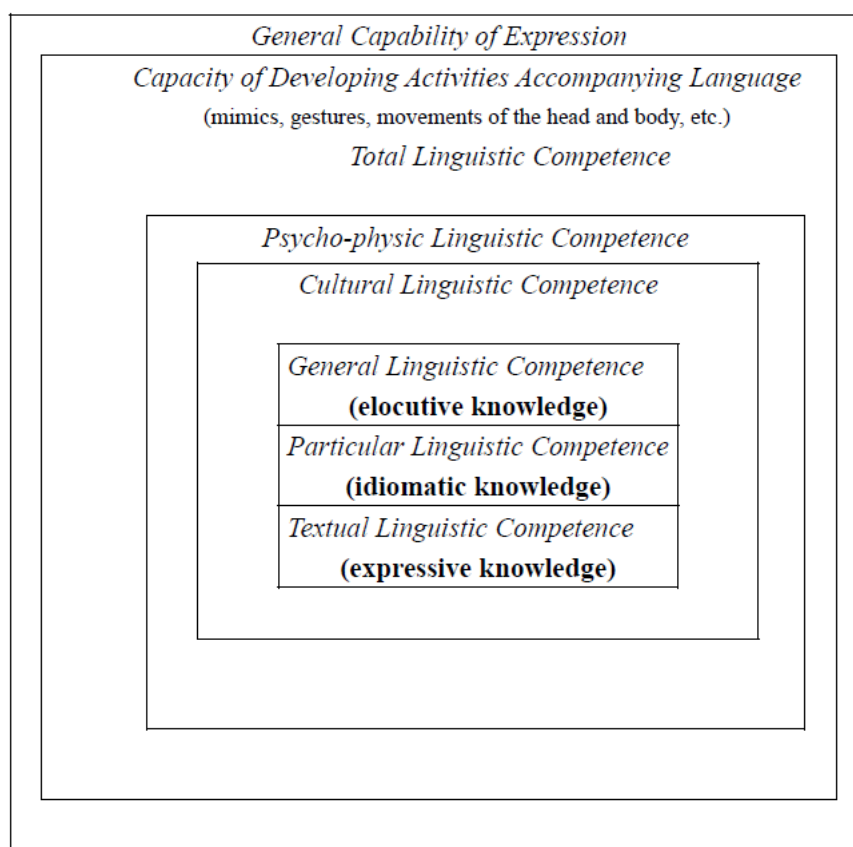
Figure 1. general capacity of expression (Coseriu, 1992: 81). Linguistic competence conceived as the activity of speaking involves all types of expression a human subject is able to manifest. A human subjects uses all the means he can, either if they are produced with his body the context or situation or if they are cultural

4.1 Layers in the Activity of Speaking: The Biological Layer of Speaking

The activity of speaking is performed not only with language but the whole body. The instruments of extra-linguistic operations act on the activity of speaking in so far as it is speaking. Human subjects speak with the modulation of voice, gestures, mimicry, the attitudes they manifest, the way they act, the clothes they wear, their behavior, what they make or omit, etc.

Extra-linguistic activities accompany and complete speaking. Sometimes they can even substitute speaking. There is thus a competence relating to the use of expressive non-linguistic means since human subjects know why gestures are made in general and how gestures operate in a particular speech community. Gestures belong to a particular speech community. There are speech communities where gestures do not exist or exist with little importance. It is the case of Hopi (American Indian people living in Little Colorado Valley, Arizona, studied in Whorf 1956: 58). Gestures thus belong to a particular tradition in the technique of speaking. The gestures functioning in, say, French, can have different meanings in Spanish, or vice versa.

The use of expressive non-linguistic means can influence purely linguistic competence. For

example, in some speech communities the expression *inverted commas* can be omitted for particular repeated movements made with the forefinger and the middle finger of both hands. This gesture does not mean anything in particular but simply that the expression said is used not denotatively but connotatively and since the expression serves the speaker it is necessary to make it known to the listener. In this way speakers introduce particular shades of meaning that can or cannot be expressed with a language. In many languages there are expressions that can only be understood if they are accompanied with particular gestures or expressions formed in accordance with particular gestures. Coseriu points out the English expression

1) Like this

This expression is usually accompanied by a gesture indicating the magnitude of the action designated. This expression and the correlative gesture have been introduced in the tradition of speaking. In a similar way in Spanish you have the expression *así* accompanied with a particular gesture with different senses.

2) Tiene una barba así (He has a beard just like this)

There are thus activities accompanying the activity of speaking not only to help the expression but *influence on the expression*. Certain expressions have been born as instruments of non-linguistic expressions and certain modes of expression are supposed to be used with those extra-linguistic instruments of expression. This happens as well in writing. Pictures and illustrations play an important role in certain texts. In comics, for example, texts cannot be understood unless with illustrations.

In speaking you can find a wide range of layers. Speaking is primarily *a psycho-physic activity*, that is, speaking is a physically and neurologically conditioned activity. This layer is the first one in speaking and can be called the *biological layer* of linguistic competence. It can easily be recognized in speaking. The capacity of speaking, that is, the physically and psychically conditioned capability of speaking belongs to the biological layer of the activity of speaking. It consists in the command of the psycho-physic mechanisms of speaking involving not only the capability of using speech organs but *the whole body*. In speaking on the part of the speaker the capacity to know to speak includes the capacity of creating and configuring symbols, creating articulated phonic signs and using them to express differences in content. On the part of the listener this layer involves the capability of perceiving and interpreting phonic signs in reference to the content configured. In children this layer is not previously or fully developed and there can be some adults who did not develop it yet or have not fully developed it.

Biologically conditioned speech mechanisms are not the object of linguistics in a strict sense since linguistics is a science of culture, the science of the free will and historical contingency of humans. Biologically conditioned speech mechanisms are the object of study of physiology, psychology and medicine including psychiatry. Because of this in the linguistic study of linguistic competence any reference to this layer is omitted. Linguistics must start with the usual activity of speaking. Linguistics has to do with cultural manifestations of free and historical human beings (Coseriu, 1992: 82-86).

4.2 The Cultural Layer of Speaking

Speaking is not a psycho-physic activity but *a cultural activity*, an activity creating culture. Speaking creates something that can eventually be learnt, transmitted and become a tradition. Both the biological layer and the cultural layer constitute speaking since speaking as a cultural activity necessarily manifests itself in material forms. Otherwise it could not exist or be subsumed by other subjects. Speaking is a cultural activity and thus its outcome can be considered as a cultural object.

In cultural objects you can distinguish two dimensions, *the dimension of creation* and t*he dimension of being and manifesting as something material*. Cultural objects are to be characterized because of two conditions: they exist in the conscience of the individual human being and are intentionally performed and interpreted. On the other hand they manifest themselves materially because the interchange from one conscience to another is only possible if it is made through material means. For example, cultural objects are performed materially in lines and figures, the pitch of the voice, body movements, speech sounds. In this sense cultural objects differ from natural objects only given in the world, and mathematical objects only existing in the conscience of humans as pure forms.

The cultural form of speaking in its form and determination can be characterized in the following way.

> *Speaking is a universal human activity performed individually in situations determined by individual speakers as representative of speech communities with communal traditions in the knowledge of speaking* (Coseriu, 1992: 86).

This definition reveals that in the cultural layer of speaking you can distinguish *three levels*:

a)   Speaking represents universal aspects present in all speakers. It is *speaking in general*. All adult human beings speak. Even silence, that is, keeping silent is in direct connection with speaking since keeping silent means 'not speaking', 'not speaking yet', or 'not continuing speaking'. Latin has two verbs to denote the reality of silence: *silere*, "not to be able to speak" (for example, things or animals cannot speak, *res et animalia silent*), and *tacere*, "not to speak when you can speak" (human beings can speak or keep silent intentionally: *homines tacent*).

b)   Any type of speaking is speaking in a particular language. You speak English or Japanese, that is, you speak in accordance with a historical tradition. This can be applied to languages invented as well. Who invents a new language creates a new tradition.

c)   Speaking is always individual under two aspects: the speaking subject is always an individual one and speaking always relates to a unique situation. In order to designate this individual activity in a unique situation Coseriu proposes the term *discourse* (Coseriu, 1992: 87).

At the same time the activity of speaking can be conceived under *three points of view*:

1)   As activity proper, that is, speaking and understanding. This activity is not complete with the performance or mechanical execution of an existing knowledge. The activity of speaking is creative using existing knowledge to say something new, that is, it is creation proper, ενέργεια, *energeia*, an activity capable to create a new knowledge, a new *idiomatic knowledge*.

2)   As the knowledge underlying that activity, that is, as competence or δύναμις, *dúnamis*.

3)   As the product created by that activity, ἔργον, *érgon*. In this way the product of speaking, *discourse,* can be kept and stored in the conscience of speakers or represented in written form (Coseriu, 1992: 88).

These distinctions go back to Aristotle. Humboldt used this distinction when he said that language is *enérgeia* not *érgon* (cf. Humboldt, 1990: 65). The distinctions by Coseriu refer to mere aspects, that is, points of view under which the reality of speaking is considered not different objects. Speakers can identify the different levels referred to here. Speakers identify the universal level of the activity of speaking. They refer to it when they give for granted or say that animals cannot speak, that small children have not acquired language yet, that someone cannot speak because of illness or accident. On the other hand speakers know intuitively the historical level. They know that they speak English or Spanish and even they can identify other languages they do not speak. They can verify that language is knowledge and say that they know English or say that Old English, for example, is very complicated. And they can verify the individual level of speaking when they identify other persons by their speech or writings. They can as well identify those speakers who speak better or worse (Coseriu, 1992: 89-90).

Two aspects define speaking: speaking is *activity* and it is *knowledge*. The purpose in the description of linguistic competence is avoiding asymmetry between the different levels in it. In *la parôle* and *la langue* both aspects mingle with each other. Activity and knowledge extend in the three levels stated above and the three points of view. The distinction by Saussure is asymmetric since *la parôle* extends across the three levels and *la langue* refers only to the historical level. This point in the explanation of the problem of linguistic competence needs being emphasized.

In order to be able to deal with the problem of linguistic competence it is necessary to introduce all aspects implicit in the three levels in conjunction with the three points of view. For the activity of speaking at the universal level Coseriu proposes the term *speaking in general*. For the activity of speaking at the particular or historical level Coseriu proposes the expression *particular or historical language.* And for the activity of speaking at the individual level Coseriu proposes the term *discourse.*

For speaking as knowledge at the universal level Coseriu proposes the expression *elocutive knowledge* (from elocution) or *general linguistic competence.* For speaking as knowledge at the historical or particular level Coseriu proposes the expression *idiomatic knowledge* or *particular linguistic competence.* And for speaking as knowledge at the individual level Coseriu proposes the expression *expressive knowledge* or *textual linguistic competence.*

And finally speaking considered as a product at the universal level is *the totality of linguistic manifestations* something empirically infinite. The product of speaking a particular language is the *particular abstract language*, that is, that kind of speaking recognized as constant and thus capable of being described. Abstract language constitutes the object of study and description of a language in grammars and dictionaries. And the product of speaking individually is *text*.

In order to describe the different levels in speaking it is necessary to start with considering speaking as *activity* and try to guess out the *knowledge* underlying it. The three levels in conjunction with the three points of view can be represented in the following diagram.

(levels in the activity of speaking)	(points of view)	Activity proper ἐνέργεια κατ´ἐνέργειαν	Activity as the potency of its performance (knowlege, competence) ἐνέργεια κατα δΰναμιν	Activity of speaking as already performed (product) ἐνέργεια κατ´ἐργον
Universal		*Speaking in general*	*Elocutive knowledge*	Total manifestations of speaking
Particular or historical		*Speaking a particular language*	*Idiomatic knowledge*	Abstract particular language
Individual		*Speaking individually*	*Expressive knowledge*	Text

Figure 2. The activity of speaking or the theory of linguistic competence by Coseriu (Coseriu, 1992: 92). In linguistic competence there are three levels and three points of view. The combination of them gives nine aspects to be considered as different realities in speech, the verbal behaviour of speakers

4.2.1 General Linguistic Level or General Linguistic Competence

General linguistic level is in accordance with the consideration of speaking as a general linguistic activity. In the expression *speaking in general* the distinction between speaking and language is not made. Speaking in general has to do with all those aspects going beyond particular languages, that is, those aspects forming part of speaking no matter which language is spoken.

All kinds of speaking are historical, that is, all modes of speaking belong to the tradition of speaking in force in a particular speech community. In the tradition of speaking there exist not only particular languages and texts but at the same time aspects having to do with speaking in general. This means that the aspects of language in general have been shaped and re-shaped in time. For example, the way people read today is different from the way people used to read in Antiquity. In Olden Times silent reading, *tacite legere,* was not usual. Saint Augustine read silently and this surprised Saint Anselm of Milan. The usual way of reading at Roman times was reading aloud.

Speakers can recognize certain aspects referring to the general linguistic level although they may not be able to recognize the language spoken. For example, naïve speakers can guess if the speaker is a man or a woman, if he is excited, happy or miserable. These problems are quite relative and the interpretation made by speakers may differ in most cases and even they may be wrong. But the fact that the interpretation may be wrong does not invalidate the fact that speakers interpret speech in the sense stated. Italians usually think that Germans are always excited even furious when they speak. The important thing is that there is an interpretation on the part of speakers.

Interpretations in the general linguistic level are more liable to occur when speakers understand the language spoken and are able to understand the material form and the contents

of speaking. As speakers of a particular language human subjects can guess whether the speaker speaks clearly or confusedly or if the speaker speaks coherently or incongruously. These valuations do not respond to a particular language but the mere fact of speaking. All languages can be spoken clearly or unintelligibly, coherently or foolishly.

No language is clear in itself. What is clear is not a language in particular but speaking, speaking can be clear in all languages. In French there is a tradition to speak clearly and this is so not because French is clear in itself but because its speakers make their best to speak clearly. In the Spanish speech community there are some speakers who make their best to speak clearly, as a general rule Americans and in particular Colombians.

General linguistic level is recognized when speakers evaluate these facts. In ordinary speaking there are terms in accordance with these facts are evaluated. They relate to the convention that speaking must respond to the usual and expected prospects. Any speaking with no deficiency, that is, responding to the rules hoped for is evaluated as *clear* and *coherent* thus reaching *the zero level of simple correspondence*. In order to refer to this type of valuation, no matter if this or that language is spoken, Coseriu proposes the term *congruent.*

The valuations referring to speaking in a language are autonomous and independent from the valuations referred to the particular language spoken and the text. In this way the following riddle,

> *3) If a cock lays an egg on the border between Spain and France. Which country does it belong to?*

Is evaluated as absurd, that is, as extremely incongruous since everybody knows that cocks lay no eggs. This statement is contrary to the knowledge of things. But you cannot say it is incorrect in any language. On the other hand if you want to tell this riddle and even if the speaker wants to emphasize its incongruity he will have to say it in the way stated. That is, in all particular languages there is a correct way of expressing absurd statements.

Valuations about congruence or incongruity in speaking are autonomous and independent from the particular language being spoken and the text the expression belongs to. The expression

> *4) Two multiplied by two is five*

Is certainly incongruous but if you want to repeat the incongruity of the speaker who said this expression the only adequate expression is to say the very incongruity of it. In that case the speaker would say something like

> *5) Peter says that two multiplied by two is five*.

That is, you have to repeat the incongruity in order to speak adequately. In a sentence like this one the purpose is not in the information given in the sentence but in something not expressed (Peter is a fool since he says things like that, for example).

The autonomy of valuations about congruence is a symptom that there is an identifiable type of linguistic knowledge corresponding to the general linguistic level.

4.2.2 Particular Linguistic Level

Speaking is always performed by virtue of a particular historical technique in the activity of speaking corresponding to a speech community historically constituted, that is, a particular language. "By virtue of a particular language" does not involve that texts belong to a language. Texts relate to a particular language since they are expressed in a language but texts considered as texts can relate to several *functional languages* (the different jargons and styles of speech, for example, legal language, the language of doctors, etc.) and even to several languages. There are texts absolutely homogeneous that belong to a functional language. In the same way a text in a historical language can have parts belonging to different functional languages. For example, in telling jokes the speech of peasants or the speech of particular territories known by speakers are usually imitated. In these cases there are at least two functional languages, the *common language* (standard language) and the supposed language of peasants or the supposed regional language being used. Particular languages are born as the languages of existing historical communities having previously existed in the conscience of speakers. The peculiar historical contingency of particular languages consists in the fact that the speech communities supporting them are constituted and defined by the language itself. This fact is usually attributed to existing communities but at the same time it can be applied to old communities having disappeared when their languages disappeared, Latin, Old English, for example. Just as historical languages there are traditions in speaking in general and especially in texts.

In speaking speakers recognize the language being spoken. For example, when speakers say

> *6) He is speaking English; they speak Russian*

Although speakers may not understand the language being spoken they can recognize it as different or unknown to theirs. If speaking is in accordance with a particular tradition in the technique of speaking in a speech community, that is, if it does not deviate from the tradition in that community it is usually considered to be *correct*. Coseriu proposes assigning correct speaking to *the zero degree of simple correspondence*. The valuation made on the correction of speaking is autonomous, that is, independent from speaking in general and the individual level of speaking. Speaking can be totally congruent and coherent and totally adequate although it may be incorrect, and vice versa, speaking can be totally correct but incongruous or inadequate. For example, the following notice in a Tokyo hotel room,

> *7) Is forbidden to steal hotel towels please. If you are not a person to do such a thing is please not to read notis* (*The European English Messenger*, volume IV/1, Spring, 1995)

This text may be totally coherent and congruent and even adequate but it is completely incorrect. On the contrary the following notice in a Japanese hotel room said,

> *8) You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid* (*The European English Messenger*, volume IV/1, Spring, 1995)

may be correct but it is inadequate and even inappropriate. This means that the different levels of speaking are autonomous.

It is usually said that the things understood are correct. The mere intelligibility of discourse is not a criterion for correction. Intelligibility has to do with speaking in general. It constitutes a previous condition for correction (Coseriu, 1992: 99). On the other hand correction is independent from adequacy. Expressions such as

  9) I've heard that your father is going to die soon

  are completely correct but inadequate and inappropriate. Correction has to do with tradition, adequacy with the particular context and situation affecting speech.

The typical example of in-correction that speakers consider adequate in many languages is the way they speak their native language to foreigners. With foreigners speakers reduce their native language although it is obvious that they know it perfectly well. For example, in Spanish the following expression may be common,

  10) Si camarero venir tú decir "cer-ve-za"; para mí pedir" vi-no". Yo rin rin. Volver enseguida

That is, Spanish speakers would consider this form of speaking to be adequate because they think that foreigners would understand in this way. But with this example Spanish speakers manifest two peculiar forms in force in the Spanish tradition of speaking, the preference for long words and the character of syllables in Spanish but these two peculiarities may be alien to speakers of other languages. This fact has had important implications in the history of languages since in some cases it has given rise to Creole and pidgin languages. Whether the idea that foreign people understand better when reducing the language spoken is right or not is another problem. In linguistics the attitude of speakers is decisive. It determines their speaking not the objective valuation of it by linguists. In linguistics it is necessary to apply the following general principle by Coseriu: language functions for and by speakers not for and by linguists. As a consequence linguists must start with the functioning of language for and by speakers. Linguists can find other reasons to explain the verbal behavior of speakers different from the reasons given by them. When speakers explain the reasons of their way of using a language they are not simply speakers but linguists and as linguists they can be —and they usually are— wrong. But in their verbal behavior it is speakers who must have the lead (Coseriu, 1992: 100).

The examples 7-10 and the fact of reduction prove that there is a verifiable kind of linguistic knowledge, *idiomatic knowledge*, different and independent from *elocutive knowledge* (universal level) and *expressive knowledge* (individual level) to be assigned to the historical or particular level of linguistic competence.

4.2.3 The Individual Level of Linguistic Competence

The activity of speaking is performed individually in situations and contexts. Common speakers verify and evaluate the following two aspects of the individual activity of speaking: speaking is performed individually and in accordance with situations and contexts. Speakers can recognize the speaker who speaks both materially and in the contents expressed. They can know if the speaker is a man or a woman, a child or an adult, an old man or woman, if the speaker is known or unknown to him, if the speaker is excited, happy or miserable and so on. They can usually say expressions like

11) It is Peter speaking

12) No, Peter cannot say such nasty words at least as far as I know.

At the same time they can evaluate the degree of *adequacy* of speech. Texts must be adequate in three aspects: adequate to the listener, the topic of conversation and the situation and context. Speakers usually manifest their approval or disapproval of the thing said with expressions such as

13) Good, that's good. You have spoken very well. That's not true. That's a lie. I wouldn't say that, etc.

These expressions or speech acts have to do with the individual level of speaking, the level of *expressive knowledge*. The individual linguistic level has its traditions as well. Linguistic communities are considered to be communities just because of their language. In the case of texts there are communities as well but these ones are not communities because of texts but the contrary: first, it is the speech community and just because they are constituted as a special community they use particular texts or types of texts. It is the case of religious communities, for example, the case of Black English in the United States. In Black people congregations in the United States a new style of speech was created and this is what makes them different.

Speakers evaluate texts. They would say, for example,

14) You should not speak in that way. You should say this and that. You should speak to a child in another way. Your speech is not appropriate to an old man.

The valuation of texts has to do with the problem if a text responds to the expected prospects in a particular case. Speaking responding to the usual expectancies of speakers is *adequate*. The valuation of the three levels of speaking has a general characteristic: valuation of speech can be annulled down upwards. If a particular text is adequate it does not matter whether it is incorrect or incongruous; if it is correct it does not matter if it is incongruous. Adequacy thus can annul in-correction and incongruity; and correction can annul incongruity. Valuations about the adequacy of texts are thus autonomous. All this proves that there is a kind of linguistic knowledge dealing with texts.

4.2.4 Linguistics Contents

To the general linguistic level there relates a special level in linguistic contents. In any speech act you can distinguish the three levels of contents: *designation*, *meaning* and *sense*. That is, any speech act refers to an aspect of reality, uses words of a particular language to refer to it and expresses something with the help of the thing referred to and the words used. *Designation* relates to the general level of linguistic contents to be assigned to the general level of linguistic competence. Designation is the connection established to extra-linguistic objects or to an aspect of reality either if it is a state of affairs in the world or relates to mental states or contents. *Meaning* relates to the particular level of linguistic competence. It is the contents given linguistically in a language, that is, the special configuration of designation made in a language. And *sense*, to be assigned to the level of discourse, is what is said in fact in the act of speaking, that is, the special linguistic content expressed by means of designation and meaning.

The three levels of linguistic contents can be represented in the three levels of speaking together with the three levels of the three types of knowledge (competence) and three types of valuation in the following diagram,

Levels	Valuation	Contents	Knowledge
Speaking in general	Congruent/ Incongruous	Designation	Elocutive knowledge
Speaking a Particular language	Correct/ Incorrect	Meaning	Idiomatic knowledge
Speaking individually Discourse	Adequate/ Inadequate	Sense	Expressive knowledge

Figure 3. Valuations by speakers, contents and knowledge constitute the three dimensions in linguistic competence. Correspondingly for linguists they constitute the three criteria to analyze linguistic competence, they all inserted in the corresponding levels of linguistic competence

Summing up, there are three levels in the cultural activity of speaking, general linguistic competence (speaking in general), particular linguistic competence (speaking a particular language) and individual linguistic competence (speaking individually). This can be verified in

a)   the valuation made by naïve speakers about the congruence, correction and the adequacy of speaking;

b)   the different types of linguistic content: designation, meaning and sense;

c)   the different types of linguistic knowledge, elocutive, idiomatic and expressive knowledge.

The following diagram represents the features defining the different levels in the activity of speaking, the different types of valuation, the types of contents and the types of knowledge (Coseriu, 1992: 102-106):

5. Conclusion

Linguistic competence consists in the *activity* of speaking, the implicit *knowledge* to speak, the *valuations* of speech and the *contents* born in speaking. Since speaking is speaking in a particular language the description of linguistic competence is the description of the so-called *idiomatic knowledge* involving speaking in general, speaking a particular language and speaking individually.

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