

On The Definition of “Competence” in Linguistic Inquiry

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حول تعريف "الكفاءة" في البحث اللغوي

ملخص: تهدف هذه الدراسة للبحث في مكانة مصطلح " الكفاءة " في نظرية تشومسكي اللغوية ونظريات بعض اللغويين . لقد كشف فحص عدد من الأعمال اللغوية عن أن تشومسكي استخدم هذا المصطلح بطرق مختلفة ولكن غير مطردة أحيانا . استخدم هذا المصطلح للدلالة ، على سبيل المثال، على نظام القواعد، الجراماتيكا، القدرة، اللغة الممثلة داخليا ، المعرفة اللغوية.....الخ . وأخيرا ، نجم عن هذا الموقف حصول غموض فكري . لقد قام بعض اللغويين أمثال هايمز و سيرل وهالبيدي وأصحاب النظرية المعنوية التوليدية بتوجيه انتقاد شديد للكيفية التي يستخدم تشومسكي هذا المصطلح حيث انه محدود وشديد التجريد مما يجعله لا يشمل عدد من النواحي الاتصالية والوظيفية التي وجدت اللغة من أجلها أصلا .

Abstract: The purpose of the present study was to investigate the status of the term “competence” in Chomsky’s linguistic theory as well as in other theories . An examination of a good number of Chomsky’s linguistic works revealed that Chomsky used the term “competence” in different but inconsistent ways, sometimes . The term was used to refer to system of rule , grammar , ability , I-Language.....etc. Eventually , this situation resulted in some conceptual obscurity . Some linguists such as Hymes , Searle ,Halliday and the generative linguists have strongly criticised the term as used by Chomsky and suggested some important revisions of the term because the term as it stands is limited and extremely abstract and does not account for the communicative and functional purposes of language

Introduction

A scholar once wrote :

We are all entitled to define our technical terms in our own way to suit our own our purposes.If others are to criticize us , then it must be clear on what grounds the criticism is based , and the criticism must be based on a firm understanding of how the technical terms are to be understood . This is where much of Chomsky’s concept of criticism breaks down , through misinterpretation of what he intends to convey by his use of the term (Taylor , 1988: 154).

Criticizing Chomsky’s tendency to use the term ‘ grammar ‘ in a systematic ambiguity once to refer to a theory and another time to competence (Chomsky ,1968), another scholar raises the following questions : “ How can that be , when the effect of the ambiguity in common use can only be to blur this distinction ?

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What light can be thrown by deliberately using the same word for things we are trying to keep apart ?”(Robinson ,1975 : 57) .

One of the most controversial issues in Chomsky’s theory is the notion of “competence “ . Competence is considered a central and an important concept which has caused a great amount of confusion and misunderstanding in linguistics (MuskatTabakowska , 1969). The confusion is partly attributed to the reader who fails to read Chomsky in an accurate and technical way as he expected the reader to do, and partly to Chomsky himself who confuses the reader with many terms and their meanings i.e. senses on different occasions . It is possible to argue against some kind of inconsistency in Chomsky’s writings,something he will probably reject.The confusion of the term “competence” can be pointed out at the level of linguistic and theoretical contexts . At one level the term is used interchangeably with other terms or is used to stand for many things . Or the term itself is ,sometimes ,used in a certain way espe- cially in some linguistic contexts such as a modifier.

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Two examples taken from Chomsky’s early writings will illustrate the type of the problem we are dealing with .On the relationship between competence and language acquisition Chomsky states “ On the basis of a limited experience with the data of speech , each normal human has developed for himself a thorough **competence in** his native language.

This **competence** can be represented,to an as yet undetermined extent ,as a system of rules that we can call the grammar of his language “ (1964: 8-9). The term “competence” in the first sentence above is followed by a preposition which suggests the meaning of **ability** or capacity associated with use, something that Chomsky does not like and he cautioned his readers against . In the second sentence the term “competence” is given a certain meaning ; that is a **system of rules** , a meaning that Chomsky rep- eatedly intends to use in his writing . Thus, we end up with two uses of the term “competence “; one for ability and another for a system of rules. Asserting this position , Chomsky reiterates what we describe as confusion:

In general ,modern descriptive structuralists pay little attention to the ‘ creative ‘ aspect of language; they do not face the problem of presenting the system of generative rules that assign structural descriptions to arbitrary sentences and thus embody the speaker’s **competence in** and **knowledge of** his language (1964 : 23) .

The second example concerns the linguistic context in which the term competence is used by Chomsky . Besides the two linguistic modifiers, used alternatively with this term, Chomsky uses some others .He points out that “ To study actual linguistic perform- ance , we must consider the interaction of a variety of factors ,of which the **underlying competence** of the speaker-hearer is only one “ Then he suggests that “ A grammar of a language purports to be a description of the ideal speaker-hearer’s **intrinsic competence**” (1965:4) In another context , we are introduced to new expressions. “ A generative grammar”

he says “ can be regarded only as a characterization of the **intrinsic tacit knowledge** or **competence** that underlines actual performance“ (1965: 140) . Finally ,Chomsky speaks of “ **idealized competence** “ (1972 :116) and “ **mature competence** ” (1995:14). The impression a reader may formulate on the basis of the aforementioned points that there are underlying and surface competence, intrinsic and non-intrinsic competence , tacit and non-tacit competence , idealized and non-idealized competence , and mature and immature competence . The reader cannot be denied the right to choose to think that way .

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The present study aims to examine the term “competence “ as it is used by Chomsky in different contexts at different periods and briefly by some influential linguists who have contributed considerably to the study of language and who disagree with Chomsky on this issue . Chomsky’s use of the term ,which will receive a special focus in the present study , has generated a great deal of discussion . Such situation has motivated some linguists to revise the term and/or to expand it . We will focus at the beginning on Chomsky’s view and demonstrate how his approach has caused some confusion and obscurity . Overall , the present study may be taken as some kind of an exploration of the subject matter of linguistic inquiry in general .

1. Chomsky On Competence

1.1 Competence as an Implied Object.

During the 1950s , the term “competence” was absent from Chomsky’s works ,but he implicitly referred to the concept in ,at least, limited sense ,that is the creative aspect of language (Newmeyer ,1986).

For Chomsky , the object of linguistic inquiry is taken to be a set of sentences (1957) . The primary focus was directed to grammatical transformations; a characterization associated with linguistic creativity .

This tendency was evident in his work entitled The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory as well (1955/1975) . Equally important is Chomsky’s critical review of B.F.Skinner’s book entitled Verbal Behavior in which he focuses on the weaknesses of the behaviorist theory of language acquisition and the adequacy of the innatist theory which can account in a more powerful way for the complexity and the creativity of the human language (1959) . In other words ,Chomsky is much interested in the syntactic rules which seem to represent what he later calls competence probably with the intention of contradicting De Saussure’s “ langue” which is believed to be an inventory of elements (Saussure ,1916).

It is noteworthy that Chomsky did not use the term “competence” in his early major works .One reason that might explain this position is that he probably had immature view on the precise nature of linguistic inquiry although one cannot rule out the possibility that he was driving towards an abstract view involving grammatical rules and transformations And that was in accordance with his decision of disengaging himself

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from empiricism or behaviorism and identifying himself more with rationalism . In some sense the concept was there but the term was not.

1.2 Competence as a System of Rules

The 1960s witnessed some significant changes in Chomsky’s theory which involves new additions to the classical model . During this era ,Chomsky introduced the terms “competence” and “performance” for the first time in 1962 in the plenary session address to the Ninth International Congress of Linguists (Newmeyer , 1996). It is believed that the terms were introduced in the context of Saussure’s comparable terms “langue” and “parole” .As alluded to earlier , unlike Chomsky’s competence which refers to rule-governed creativity , Saussure’s langue is an inventory of elements that lack rules .

Chomsky views “competence” as a system of rules which altogether constitute the grammar of the native speaker . The grammar or competence is believed to include three basic components ;syntactic ,phonological ,and semantic of which the first represents the central component.(1964). He asserts this position as he says “ The competence of the speaker –hearer can relate signals to semantic interpretations of these signals .The problem for the grammarian is to discover this system of rules “ (1966: 9)

But , it is noteworthy that Chomsky still focuses on linguistic creativity .In this regard ,Chomsky and Miller (1963:271) state that :

The fundamental fact that must be faced in any investigation of language and linguistic behavior is the following : a native speaker of a language has the ability to comprehend an immense number of sentences that he has never previously heard and to produce ,on the appropriate occasion ,normal utterances that are similarly understandable to other native speakers.

On one hand, this statement asserts the notion of linguistic creativity as the object of linguistic inquiry , and on the other hand, it makes some speculations about a possible psycholinguistic model in the future .

1.3 Competence as Knowledge

It was pointed out earlier that Chomsky (1964) used competence in contrast with knowledge of language as shown in the phrase “ the

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speaker’s competence and knowledge of his language “ . However, this situation has changed and competence is now defined as knowledge . In Aspects ,Chomsky clearly identifies the object of linguistic theory and defines both competence and performance and the relationship between the two . He says :

Linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker – listener ,in a completely homogeneous speech community ,who **knows** its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations ,distractions,

shifts of attention, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying

his **knowledge of** the language in actual performance (1965:3).

Idealization, according to Chomsky, is necessary and it is motivated by the need to exclude language variation and aspects of performance that bear no relationship on competence.

Then, Chomsky distinguishes between “competence” and “performance” by defining the former as “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge” and the latter as “the actual use of language” (1965:4). Competence is, somewhat, equivalent to knowledge of language. It is noticeable that Chomsky ignores the notion of knowledge in the definition of performance. One might have expected to read a definition such as “the actual use of knowledge of language”. Did Chomsky deliberately drop the notion of knowledge from the definition of performance? Surprisingly, Chomsky incorporates this element in the definition many years later when he redefines the native speaker’s performance as “what he does with that knowledge and understanding” (1995: 14).

Competence –performance relationship has been a controversial issue in linguistics in a sense that it leads to confusion, sometimes. Chomsky has repeatedly argued that competence has some role to play in the actual use of language i.e. performance. But, this role is occasionally outlined and rarely identified in a precise and consistent way as it will be shown shortly. Competence is believed to be just one factor among many others that interact in the process of production and perception of language. Performance is, therefore, not a direct reflection of competence and it cannot be that sort in actual use because of numerous false starts, deviation from rules, changes of plan in mid-course. (Chomsky, 1965)

It is important to note that performance represents the source of competence. That is, on the basis of performance, competence is

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abstracted. “The problem for the linguist, as well as for the child learning the language,” Chomsky notes “is to determine from the data of performance the underlying system of rules that has been mastered by the speaker – hearer and that he puts to use in actual performance” (1965:4).

Generally speaking, it is believed that the competence-performance relationship may be characterized as follows: competence as an idealized model of linguistic performance, competence as a central component of an idealized performance model, and as an independent abstract entity remote from linguistic performance (Derwing, 1973). Rejecting the philosophical argument of Harman (1969), concerning the nature of knowledge of language whether it is “**knowing how**” or “**knowing that**”, Chomsky seems to advocate an alternative view namely “knowing of” and nothing else (1969) (1986). This is the position he maintains especially in the 1980s onwards in which the term “competence” has lost much of its attraction in favor of the term “knowledge”. Furthermore, Chomsky focuses on knowledge without having the intention to explain behavior. As Salkie observes:

Chomsky is not using knowledge to explain behavior. The explanation

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he proposes is that these items of knowledge are based on principles which are encoded in our genes and hence part of the structure of the mind/brain. This puzzle is entirely about knowledge, and the explanation is about knowledge, too (1990 : 54).

1.4 Competence as Ability

The relationship between competence and ability represents the most controversial aspect of this concept. Competence is sometimes identified as ability. The question is : What type of relationship does exist between competence and ability ? Linguistic investigation should focus on the ability of the native speaker who is capable of understanding and producing novel sentences (Chomsky and Miller, 1963). Actually, the essence of linguistic inquiry is to address the following aspects of “ability” as manifested in the these questions :

1. What is the precise nature of this **ability** ?
2. How is **it** put to use ? and
3. How does **it** arise in the individual ?

It is interesting to point out that the same questions have been raised
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recently but with the inclusion of term “knowledge” rather than “ability”.(1986: 3). This is, of course, a significant terminological and conceptual change.

Chomsky continues to maintain the same position of equating competence with ability implicitly as he says a grammar “attempts to account for the ability of a speaker to understand an arbitrary sentence of his language and to produce an appropriate sentence on a given occasion” (1966 :3). Then, he explicitly makes this equivalence clear as he states that “the technical term ‘**competence**’ refers to the **ability** of the idealized speaker-hearer to associate sounds and meaning strictly in accordance with the rules of his language” (1972:116).

However, Chomsky, being probably under criticism from linguists, psychologists, and philosophers, has finally decided to put an end to the confusion that resulted from mixing up competence and ability. He has also intended to emphasize the notion of abstractness in linguistics on one hand, and to dismiss any doubtful linkage of linguistic theorization with empiricism and behaviorism. He remarks :

Thus it does not seem to me quite accurate to take ‘knowledge of English’ to be a **capacity** or **ability**, though it enters into the capacity or ability exercised in language use. In principle, one might have that cognitive structure that we call ‘knowledge of English’, fully developed, with no capacity to use this structure; Knowledge, understanding, or belief is at a level more abstract than capacity (1975 :23).

Within this context, Chomsky asserts that :

The notion ‘**capacity**’ and ‘family of dispositions’ are more closely related to behavior and ‘language use’, they do not lead us to inquire into the nature of the ‘ghost in the machine’

though the study of cognitive structures and their organization , as normal scientific practice and intellectual curiosity would demand (1975:23-24) .

On another occasion ,Chomsky explicitly addresses himself to this problem :

The term ‘competence ‘entered the technical literature in an effort to avoid entanglement with the slew of problems relating to ‘knowledge’ , but it is misleading in that it suggests ‘**ability**’ -an association I would like to sever (1980: 59) .

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Chomsky’s reasoning for rejecting the notion of characterizing knowledge as ability goes as follows :

Two people may share exactly the same knowledge of language , but differ markedly in their ability to put this knowledge to use. Ability to use language may improve or decline without any change in knowledge .This ability may also be impaired , selectively or in general ,with no loss of knowledge , a fact that would become clear if injury leading to impairment recedes and lost ability is recovered (1986 : 9) .

1.5 Competence as Internalized Language

Following his strategy of continual reconsidering and revising already investigated linguistic situations ,Chomsky introduces the two terms of I(nternalized) and E(xternalized) languages within the context of what is known as the first conceptual shift . The two notions were implicit in Chomsky’s early works in the 1950s (Smith ,1999). This shift involves a shift from behavior or E-language as an object of linguistic inquiry practiced by the structuralists to the study of the system of knowledge of language. Accordingly ,the object of linguistic inquiry has become I-language . Although this characterization or dichotomy of I-language vs.E-language represents a reflection of the general change of emphasis in the cognitive revolution that was taking place at the time (Smith,1999) , it’s been criticized as being “ a throwback to an earlier period “ (Lyons, 1991: 167).

Chomsky describes the I-language as “ some element of the mind of the person who knows the language ,acquired by the learner,and used by the speaker-hearer “ (1986:22), as “the system of knowledge attained “ (1986:26) , and as “ a system , represented in the mind of a particular individual “ (1986:36) .In the light of this characterization , linguistics is expected to focus on I-language .In fact ,we are introduced to a new focused type of linguistics , known as I –linguistics, a type that is certainly what Chomsky intends to deal with . I-linguistics is concerned with “ FL [faculty of language] , the states it assumes , and the expressi- on these I-languages generate ,” (Chomsky,2000 : 169) .

Is it possible to equate the notion of I-language with competence ? The answer comes from Chomsky himself . He says “ There is reason to believe that the **I-Languages** (“**grammatical competence** “) are distinct

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from conceptual organization and “ pragmatic competence “ and that these systems can be selectively impaired and developmentally dissociated “ (2000 : 26) . Cook (1988) believes that they are partly corresponding to each other . This is a logical conclusion at least from one perspective i.e. as each being the object of linguistic inquiry . But a close examination of I-language reveals its sophisticated nature as being internal , individual, and intensional(Chomsky ,1995) .Now, grammatical competence is included under the umbrella of the knowledge of language in addition to pragmatic competence and conceptual system (Botha,1989).In another attempt , Chomsky redefines competence as “ the **cognitive state** that encompasses all those aspects of form and meaning and their relation , including underlying structures that enter into that relation ,which are properly assigned to the specific subsystem of the human mind that relates representations of form and meaning “(1980:59).

For Chomsky , language is no longer a collection of well-formed sentences as demonstrated in his old approaches . He remarks :

When we speak of a person as knowing a language ,we do not mean that he or she knows an infinite set of sentences , or sound-meaning pairs taken in extension , or a set of acts or behaviors : Rather ,what we mean is that the person knows what makes sound and meaning relate to one another in a specific way , what makes them ‘hang together ‘ , a particular characterization of a function , perhaps (1986:27) .

The concept of language which is the subject matter of linguistic investigation is a complex phenomenon which constitutes a system of principles and parameters fixed ,along with a periphery of marked exceptions .This is the result and the essence of what Chomsky calls the second conceptual shift (1986) .

1.6 A General Comment

The above discussion suggests that Chomsky does not adhere to one term and or concept while handling the notion of “competence”. It is true that he has not written for the layman and he has argued his linguistic theory forcefully and successfully against the empiricists/structuralists and the functionalists , he , nevertheless confuses his reader partly because of what he calls “ systematic ambiguity “ and partly because of his tendency of driving more and more

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toward a higher degree of abstraction Not only that ,but it seems that Chomsky’s use of many dichotomies has contributed largely through the years to what we call the “fuzzy linguistic scene” sometimes , especially with regard to some issues such as the object of linguistic inquiry .

What is noticeable about Chomsky’s theory is the fact that Chomsky has continually revised his theory , sometimes greatly and at some other time slightly . This situation has led him to invent ,modify or revise terms in order to account for the new developments in the theory . Furthermore ,the theory has

evolved through five decades and consequently different models of the theory; the classical model , the standard model , etc . , have emerged . Chomsky is probably the only linguist who has formulated and reformulated a linguistic theory in such way . We must note here that there is nothing wrong with this strategy and we do not intend to underestimate the theory . However , we conclude this section by raising the following question about his approach to the present issue , that is “ competence “ : How does this methodology fit in the framework of an exact science such as linguistics ?

2. Other Linguists On Competence

2.1 Hymes on Competence

The major challenge for Chomsky’ grammatical competence comes from Dell Hymes whose ideas on the notion of competence have gained important attention and popularity in theoretical as well as applied linguistics . Hymes flatly rejects Chomsky’s abstract view on competence and thus he introduces his own definition of “communicative competence “ .Hymes defines competence “as the most general term for the capabilities of a person “ . It is , he adds , “ dependent upon (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use “ . (1972 : 282) .

Language for Hymes is a human activity . Instead of speaking of an ideal speaker –hearer , as Chomsky does , he speaks of a real speaker –hearer . For Hymes , competence is knowledge and ability . He extends the concept to include knowledge of aspects of language other than grammar . According to him, communicative competence is the ability to

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do something ,to use language and it involves four parameters ;namely possibility , feasibility , appropriateness , and attestedness in actual performance . Hymes’s (1972 :277-278) reasoning for adopting such position goes as follows :

We have to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences ,not only as grammatical ,but also as appropriate .He or she acquires competence as to when to speak ,when not ,and as to what to talk about with whom,when,where ,in what manner .In short ,a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts ,to take part in speech events

and to evaluate their accomplishment by others .This competence ,moreover,

is integral with attitudes ,values,and motivations concerning language ,its features and uses ,and integral with competence for ,and attitudes toward, the interaction of language with the other code of communicative conduct.

There is no doubt that Hymes’s characterization of competence seems to be more adequate in the sense that it can capture the reality of language with all its complexity especially at the abstract and concrete levels.

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2.2 The Generative Semanticists on Competence

The generative semanticists disagree with Chomsky regarding the identity and the nature of the generative component of grammar .For them the core component of grammar is semantics , not syntax . Therefore, a shift has been made from syntactic representation to semantic representation . McCawly ,for example , asserts this view .He says “ I take linguistic competence here as refining to a speaker’s internalized system for relating meanings to possible ways of expressing them and the characteristics of linguistic and extralinguistic context under which particular ways of expressing them are appropriate “ (Quoted in Newmeyer,186:125) . It is obvious ,then , that the semantic representation is the principal object of study .

2.3 Searle and Halliday on Competence

Searle ,who ,following Austin’s (1962) theorizations in this regard has proposed a speech acts theory , strongly criticizes Chomsky’s view on competence. He rejects the extreme abstraction of Chomsky manifested in Chomsky’s treatment of sentences as abstract

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objects that are produced and understood independently of their role in communication . The criticism is sound and convincing simply because the semantic competence ,underlying those sentences, which constitutes one element of grammatical competence is the ground for knowing what and how to perform and understand speech acts or illocutionary acts . This competence is a competence to perform . Searle (1972: 31) cogently remarks that :

He (Chomsky) seems to think that a theory of speech acts must be a theory of performance rather than a theory of competence because he fails to see that competence is ultimately the competence to perform and for this reason a study of the linguistic aspects of the ability to perform speech acts is a study of linguistic competence .

It is noteworthy that Halliday ,somehow , shares the pragmaticians’ views . He argues that the functional dimension of language is essential for any linguistic theory . He is content that “ Linguisticsis concernedwith the description of speech acts or texts , since only through the study of language in use are all the features of language , and therefore all components of meaning ,brought into focus “ (1970: 145) . Thus, he considers the competence/performance distinction as unnecessary and misleading .

2.4 Applied Linguists on Competence

Following the institutionalization of the term “ communicative competence “ by Hymes , some applied linguists borrowed the term and extended it to cover some components of language use . Canale and Swain (1980) ,for example ,suggest that communicative competence may comprise subcompetences such as grammatical , sociolinguistic ,and

strategic ones .Later, Canale (1983) added the discourse competence as a four subcompetence .

Another influential model proposed by Bachman and revised by Bachman and Palmer (1996) advocates using “ language competence” instead of communicative competence . According to this model,language competence consists of two major types of competence ;organizational and pragmatic .The organizational is divided into grammatical (vocabulary, morphology , syntax, phonology) and textual (cohesion,rhetorical organization) ,whereas the pragmatic one is divided into sociolinguistic (differences in dialect or variety.) and illocutionary (functional aspects of language) .

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3. Conclusion

The previous discussion with the given examples demonstrated how the term “competence” is used in different ways and senses . But the confusion lies not in the these uses because it could happen that a writer may follow this strategy in order to serve certain purposes .This is not the case with the term “competence” as used especially by Chomsky . The case of competence is not a matter of a word/term and its senses .It is certainly more than that . The term “competence” as used by Chomsky seems to refer to many things in the theory .It refers to grammar , theory itself , rules , ability , I-language , knowledge of language , system of knowledge of language , cognitive state , cognizing , computational system of the language faculty, system of finite means , mastery of the generative grammar of the language . If confronted with these situations ,Chomsky would probably respond by saying : Never mind , this is because of the systematic ambiguity I suggested before but they should not result in any confusion if the distinctions are kept in mind . However some linguists have disagreed with Chomsky and proposed some alternatives that can address the object of linguistic inquiry taking into account the fact that language is not just a set of rules stored in the speaker’s mind but a code for communication . The object of linguistic inquiry should not be taken to be that simple form represented by the mere language rules/knowledge (competence in the Chomskyan sense) because this alone cannot reveal how the structure of human mind works. A more sophisticated form of competence as proposed by some linguists is certainly needed in order to account for all aspects of language as a mental and a concrete phenomenon.

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