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COMPETENCE, CAPABILITY AND VIRTUAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract – As has been extensively exemplified in the ELF literature, users of English as a lingua franca are capable of using language to communicate in contextually appropriate ways even though in so doing they may not conform to the norms of Standard English or the usage of native speakers, which are generally taken to provide the benchmarks of competence in the language. This raises the question of what kind of construct competence is and how far it accounts for the ability to communicate. And if 'incompetent' users manage to be capable communicators, then what is the nature of this capability? If it refers to some kind of knowledge other than competence, what kind is it, and how is this knowledge acted upon in the actual pragmatic process of communication? Addressing these questions leads to the recognition that communication in general is achieved by the exercise of a general lingual capability that, unlike the concept of competence, is not a matter of conformity to the actual encodings of any particular language but the exploitation of the coding potential of virtual language.

Keywords: communication; English as a lingua franca; competence; conformity; capability; virtual language

As is now widely recognised, the extended networks of interaction that globalization has brought about have naturally resulted in the communicative use of language that transcends the borders of different languages conventionally associated with separate lingua-cultural communities. The use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a particularly striking example of such use. One obstacle in an understanding of this global lingual phenomenon, and therefore of the nature of ELF, is the proliferation of terms that have been used to label it. Jacquemet has provided a list of them:

> Just in the first decade of the twenty-first century, language scholars, never too shy to create new words, have introduced the following terms: *codemeshing* (Canagarajah 2006), *transidiomatic practices* (Jacquemet 2005), *truncated multilingualism* (Blommaert *et al.* 2005), *transnational heteroglossia* (Bailey 2007), *polylingualism* (Jørgensen 2008), *translanguaging* (García 2009), *plurilingualism* (Canagarajah 2009), *flexible bilingualism* (Creese and Blackledge 2010), *heterolingualism* (Pratt et al. 2011), *metrolingualism* (Otsuji and Pennycook 2011), *translingual practices* (Canagarajah 2011), and *transglossic language practices* (Sultana *et al.* 2015). (Jacquemet 2016, p. 336)

All of these terms refer in one way or another to lingual practices, to kinds of linguistic behaviour or performance. The abstract knowledge that is assumed to be acted upon in these actual practices is, of course, what has been labelled 'competence'. But here too there is a confusing proliferation of terms. Just as practices have been labelled transidiomatic and translingual and transglossic, so competence has been variously labelled as sociolinguistic, strategic, multilingual, inter-cultural and so on. All these, and many others, are the terminological outgrowths of Chomsky's original formulation of the concept, beginning with Hymes' definition of communicative competence as the ability to assess how far an expression in a language is grammatically possible, feasible in the sense of being readily decipherable, appropriate to context, and attested as having been actually performed (Hymes 1972).

Subsequently, communicative competence was said to consist of four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic (Canale 1983), though how they relate to each other, or to the four features proposed by Hymes, is not made clear. In Bachman (1990) we find what is called 'language competence' divided into no less than fourteen different components (for further discussion see Widdowson 2003, Ch. 12). It seems obvious that some clarification of the concept of competence is called for, and how it might relate to these different communicative practices that have been so variously and inventively named.

It might be, and indeed has been, argued that an enquiry into how language is used can dispense with the concept of competence altogether and should concentrate attention exclusively on the practices. This, for example, would appear to be the position taken by Pennycook, who urges the need:

> ...to look at language as a practice is to view language as an activity **rather than** a structure, as something we do **rather than** a system we draw on. (Pennycook 2010, p. 2, emphasis added)

Although, as the very use of ELF makes clear, language cannot simply be viewed as a separate self-enclosed formal system, using it must obviously involve drawing on some preconceived knowledge or other. It is not a matter of setting language as something we do **in opposition** to something we know, but of enquiring into the **relationship** between knowing and doing. The essential issue is how far this knowing can be equated with competence as this has been conventionally conceived.

The first point to make is that, although, as we have seen, it has been conceptualised in many different ways, competence has always been related to particular languages and communities assumed to be well-defined. This is of course made quite explicit in Chomsky's formulation of the concept as being the linguistic knowledge of 'an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community' (Chomsky 1965, p. 3). But it is equally

clear if not so explicitly stated in Hymes's account of communicative competence. Here competence is defined as the knowledge needed to recognise the degree to which a particular instance of a language measures up to a norm which is assumed to be conventional in a particular community. As Hymes puts it:

> There is an important sense in which a **normal member of a community** has knowledge with respect to all these aspects of the communicative systems available to him. (Hymes 1972, p. 282, emphasis added)

It is hard to see how a normal member of a community is conceptually essentially different from Chomsky's ideal speaker-listener and the community conceived of as enclosed and well defined, if not homogeneous. So, communicative competence is represented as a matter of conformity to a particular set of communal norms. The obvious implication is that you cannot competently communicate in a language unless you conform to the conventions that obtain in the community of its native speakers.

Communicative competence for Hymes then is inextricably bound up with the concept of a particular community of speakers. His concern is not how language is used in communication but how a particular language is conventionally used by members of a particular speech community. In this respect, he follows the traditional ethnographic approach to the study of communication. Here too it is the normative features of communal language use that is the focus of attention. This is how Saville-Troike puts it:

> The subject matter of the ethnography of communication is best illustrated by one of its most general questions: **what does a speaker need to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community**, and how does he or she learn to do so? **Such knowledge, together with whatever skills are needed to make use of it, is *communicative competence*.** The requisite knowledge includes not only rules for communication (both linguistic and sociolinguistic) and shared rules for interaction, but also the **cultural rules** and knowledge that are the basis for the context and content of communicative events and interaction processes. (…) **The focus of the ethnography of communication is the *speech community*, the way communication within it is patterned and organized as systems of communicative events, and the ways in which these interact with all other systems of culture**. (Saville-Troike 2003, p. 3, emphasis added)[1]

[1] It is worth noting that the linking of competence to community necessarily involves the expression of socio-cultural identity. Ways of using a language define a particular community, which is why language and culture are said to be indivisible. But the use of the language as a communicative resource in contexts and for purposes outside these communities necessarily divides the language from its particular cultural associations and so provides for the variable expression of different cultural identities.

The focus then of ethnography is how language is used within speech communities but this, of course, presupposes that such communities can be clearly defined. According to Gumperz a speech community is:

> ...any human aggregate characterized by **regular and frequent** interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and **set off** from similar aggregates by **significant differences** in language usage. (Gumperz 1971, p. 114, emphasis added)

Although this definition has the superficial appearance of precision, like the Hymes definition of competence, it is based on unsubstantiated normative assumptions: at what point, one might ask, are occurrences of interaction deemed to be 'regular and frequent', and what are the criteria for determining whether differences are 'significant' or not?

The concept of competence, then, dependent as it is on indeterminate ideas about what constitutes speech communities and their languages, is essentially what we have previously called a "convenient methodological fiction" (Seidlhofer 2011, p. 71). This is not to deny its validity, for all theoretical enquiry must be based on some idealised abstraction of one kind or other. But validity is also relative, and the abstraction has to be seen as having some plausible correspondence with an actual state of affairs. So long as communities are relatively lingua-culturally enclosed, it is indeed justifiable to define a speech community as:

> a **local** unit, characterized for its members by **common locality** and **primary interaction.** (Hymes 1974, p. 51)

But this state of affairs no longer obtains in a world of shifting populations and digitalized networks of communicative interaction. This is, of course, particularly the case with English: users of the language are not members of a local unit sharing a common locality and obviously do not constitute a community characterized by a distinctive usage of shared verbal signs that can be identified as a language variety. What we have here are users who communicate 'without competence', not by conforming to the norms of a language variety but by the adaptive pragmatic exploitation of linguistic resources (Widdowson 2015). The traditional notion of speech community and the concept of competence that depends upon it clearly cannot account for the kind of translingual/transglossic/translanguaging practices that are enacted in global communication, and which are so clearly exemplified in ELF. But then the question arises: is there an alternative way of accounting for them?

As is clear from the preceding discussion, ELF is not to be conceived of as a kind of English, not a language variety, but essentially as the

expedient exploitation of linguistic resources as a means of communication. That being so, it is misleading to focus attention on the E of ELF, as researchers have sometimes tended to do: the various forms that it can take are only symptoms of the communicative process, an epiphenomenon, and to focus on them can easily distract attention from the causative process itself. Understanding ELF therefore crucially depends on an understanding of the nature of communication in general.

Over fifty years ago, Roman Jakobson identified what he called 'the constitutive factors in any speech event, in any act of verbal communication.'[2] He set them out as follows:

	CONTEXT	
ADDRESSER	MESSAGE	ADDRESSEE
	CONTACT	
	CODE	

(Jakobson 1960)

Let us first consider the message factor. When we use this term in everyday communication we can mean one of two very different things. A message on the one hand is an actual piece of language, something that is worded in speech or writing, like the text messages we send when we email and twitter. In this sense, the message is a fixed linguistic entity, an encoding, which can therefore be described in sole reference to the code factor. But we also use the term message to refer to some intended meaning, to what is meant by a text, and in this case the message factor crucially relates to the factors of addresser and addressee. Whereas the message in one sense is a text that can be decoded, in the other sense it is a discourse that can only be interpreted.

It is the relationship between these two senses of message that is central to an understanding the nature of communication. Two questions arise.

1. How are we to define the code that is used in the encoding of a particular message form?
2. How is this encoding related to the intended and interpreted message meanings of addresser and addressee?

Scholars who have been concerned with the ethnography of communication generally assume that the code is what de Saussure calls *langue*, a system of rules that define the formal properties of a standard language, a knowledge of which constitutes the linguistic competence of its speakers. These are the rules that are enshrined in standard grammars and dictionaries of particular

[2] This was later taken up and extended by Hymes (1974) to provide a framework for the ethnographic description of communicative practices in particular communities, in line with the approach to the ethnography of communication discussed earlier.

languages, and knowing them, according to Hymes, enables a 'normal member of speech community' to assess how far a particular message form is possible in a language, that is to say how far it conforms to rule. To talk of normal members presupposes an abstract norm. As pointed out earlier, this would seem to correspond with Chomsky's ideal speaker-listener for it is obvious that actual speaker listeners vary considerably in their competence and have only a partial knowledge of the code recorded in the grammars and dictionaries which represent their language. What then counts as the code of a language in this view is an abstract construct of what an ideal community of 'normal' speakers knows of a set of encodings, canonical message forms that represent what de Saussure calls *un état de langue* – a language state, a static language. As such the concept is both too broad and too narrow: too broad because it assumes that all speakers have the same common competence which they clearly do not, too narrow because it defines a code as a sum of its present manifestations without allowing for its inherent potential for further exploitation.

For a code cannot be equated with the collectivity of types of message form that have resulted from its use. These forms conform to certain encoding principles but the forms that have actually been produced by no means exhaust the virtual potential of the code. It just happens that certain forms have historically been suited to particular communicative purposes in the contexts of use of particular communities and have thus become conventionally established. So, what linguists describe as **the** English language are the particular encodings that serve the communicative needs of particular communities, and have become conventionalised over time and as these needs change, so some encodings fall out of use, new ones emerge and descriptions are revised accordingly to keep up to date. And so, we get grammars or dictionaries of **current** English or German or Italian. But what is current is also what is only temporary and fleeting and soon dated. Grammars or dictionaries are essentially historical documents of actually attested manifestations of code use, not accounts of the code itself. They describe the forms the realization of this potential has taken, but not what forms it might take. In this sense grammars and dictionaries of current English are no different from those of Old or Middle English: descriptions of idealized *états de langue*.

The very fact that grammars and dictionaries have to be continually updated makes it obvious that any description of the present state of the language can only be a very partial account - an account of conventionalized encodings - and does not represent the inherent potential of the code itself – of ways in which this potential can be used to make meanings to meet the needs of changing circumstances.

We refer to this inherent meaning making potential as the virtual language. The term 'meaning potential' will perhaps be familiar: it is used by Halliday, and used also in reference to formally encoded linguistic properties (Halliday 1973). But there is a crucial difference. For Halliday, this meaning potential is inherent in the grammatical systems of actualised encodings. These systems take the form they do because they have evolved to serve social and communicative purposes, that is to say, pragmatic functions in the past have been systematized as the semantics of the present state of the language, and hence the name Systemic/Functional Grammar. One may accept that the formal systems of the present grammar of English are historically determined by the pragmatic functions they have been needed for in the past, but it does not follow that they determine what pragmatic functions the language will be needed for in the future. On the contrary, since these needs will necessarily relate to quite different contexts and purposes, the form the language takes will, on Halliday's own argument, change accordingly. (For further discussion see Widdowson 2004, Ch. 2).

Pragmatic function is obviously not simply the direct projection of a conventionalized semantic system but the exploitation of the code potential of which this system is one realization. It is of course true that such a system has meaning potential in the sense that, like any grammar, it allows for creativity in the Chomskyan sense – the production of infinite formal permutations. But this is strictly confined creativity bound by conformity to the conventionalized systemic rules that define the actual language. The meaning potential that serves the variable and ever-changing communicative needs of language users cannot be, and clearly is not, so confined. They can only be met by the creative exploitation of the encoding resources represented by the virtual language.

But the particular message forms that are created to meet these needs will conform to the encoding principles of the virtual language. Such principles must pre-exist in the minds of communicators: code is an essential factor and communication would be impossible without it. So, what is the nature of this code conceived of as constituting the virtual language, and how do users conform to its principles in the adaptively creative process of making meaning?

The first point to be made is that a code, as usually understood, is of its nature internally consistent so that all message forms encoded in it conform to its rules and can be reliably deciphered accordingly. The term is therefore a

misnomer in reference to Standard English, which, of course, bristles with inconsistencies, with idiosyncratic encodings that have accumulated over time by historical happenstance. The way adverbial particles are attached to some transitive verbs but not to others is an obvious example: *attend to* but not *notice to, talk about* but not *discuss* or *describe about* and so on. The plural morpheme is attached to abstract nouns like *communication, opinion, expense* but not to, *evidence, information, advice*. Some nouns denoting human qualities are morphologically derived from adjectives, like *sadness, happiness, boldness, foolishness, cleverness* but this does not apply to semantically related nouns like *gay, anxious, brave, stupid*. Since a code, by definition, is to be consistent, it seems reasonable to say that there are virtual rules in English whereby all nouns can be pluralised by what might be called the proto-morph *-s*, and can be derived from adjectives with the proto-morph *-ness*. So, expressions like *evidences* and *advices* are entirely consistent with the virtual language rules. Similarly, *anxiousness* and *braveness* are regular formations whereas the standard English encodings *anxiety* and *bravery* are not.

To take another example, some adjectives can be negated by the prefix un- as in *unhappy, unsure, uncomfortable, unavoidable* whereas others are assigned a different prefix – *insecure, inconsiderate, incompetent, inappropriate, inevitable, irresponsible.* One might of course attempt to discover regularities and so reduce these idiosyncrasies to rule. We might, for example, propose an encoding rule that constrains the use of *in-* to words of at least three syllables which would preclude the formation of *un-considerate, un-comprehensible* but then it would also preclude two syllable words in standard English like *im-possible* and *in-active* and the four syllable *un-precedented*. Again, one might propose that the use of *un-* or *in-* is determined not only by syllabic but also morphological constraints – that it is words of two or more syllables that have the *-able* or *-ible* suffix that require the *in-* prefix. Words like *in-conceivable* and *in-dispensible* would conform to this encoding rule, but the standard *un-imaginable* and *un-controllable* would not.

The quest for lower order encoding rules of increasing complexity would quickly fall prey of the law of diminishing returns and lose explanatory value. It would seem more sensible to propose that *in-/im-* are idiosyncratic allomorphic variants of what we might call the proto-morph *un-* which is regular encoding of adjective negation in the virtual language. It just happens that the *in-* variant is preferred to *un-* used for some adjectives in one variety of English. But this is an incidental feature of conventional usage and not a constraint imposed by the code. In this view, words like *un-possible, un-conceivable*, are entirely in conformity with virtual encoding rules. (For further discussion see Widdowson 2015).

The point is that encoding rules of Standard English are not consistently applied, and of course the same is true of other languages, and it is this in or un consistency, this irregularity – or unregularity, or disregularity – that poses such difficulty for learners who, to achieve so-called competence in a language, have to know when rules apply and when they do not.

Their difficulty is compounded by the fact that this variability of rule application very often has little if any communicative significance. To take one example: the expression *next to.* In an earlier state of English, this, like the semantically similar preposition *near,* had no particle attached to it, hence the place name *Wells Next the Sea*. The absence of *to* presents no problem in understanding. Indeed, communicatively effective message forms can be produced while dispensing entirely with the particle *to* whatever its encoded function. This is amusingly illustrated in a poem by Sophie Hannah.

Wells-Next-the-Sea

I came this little seaside town
And went a pub they call The Crown
Where straight away I happened see
A man who seemed quite partial me.
I proved susceptible his charms
And fell right in his open arms.
From time time, every now and then,
I hope meet up with him again.

This encoded feature of Standard English is dispensed with to create a particular effect. That is its purpose. But for many purposes and for many if not most users of English, other features of Standard English can be – and are – dispensed with as surplus to communicative requirement.

What these users do is to exploit the redundancies of conventionalized encodings, often by regularizing their inconsistencies. So, the use of expressions that do not replicate conventional encodings, like *anxiousness,* or *informations*, or *unsecure,* are entirely in accord with encoding rules. Where they occur, in ELF usage for example, they are evidence of direct access to these rules, bypassing the conventions of the standard language, which have no necessary relevance for effective communication. Such forms are of course incorrect in reference to Standard English, but such correctness has to do with norms of linguistic conduct that apply only restrictively in certain communities and have little if any relevance anywhere else. Correct English is usually equated with proper English, but proper English has to do with propriety, that is to say conformity to conventionalized linguistic etiquette, and this has only a very limited bearing on communicative appropriacy – or appropriateness. On the contrary, for countless users of English, so called native speakers included, conformity to the correctness and the propriety of

Standard English would inhibit the adaptable use of linguistic resources to produce communicatively effective message forms.

Hymes' familiar definition of communicative competence is, as was pointed out earlier, based on the concept of an enclosed community, a 'normal' member of which can make certain judgements about a particular message form. One judgement is the extent to which it is possible, and since the judgement is norm based, this can only mean the extent to which the message form is correct or proper in reference to conventionalized encodings. The possible does not account for the creative potential of the virtual code. Another judgement is the extent to which a particular message form is actually performed. Nowadays, corpus analysis provides a mass of objective data on which such a judgement can be reliably based. In consequence, what counts as correct or proper English has over recent years been extended to include not only what conforms to established encodings but also what conforms to idiomatic patterns of actual native speaker usage. This is said to be real or authentic English and the assumption seems to be that users are communicatively competent to the extent that they conform to these patterns of usage. But of course these are conventionalized message forms, patterns of performance which are only real for a select and relatively small number of native speaker users. They are instances of what is actually attested as having been produced – but only by a restricted community of users.

So, to return to Jakobson's factors, it is obvious that what form a message takes to be communicatively effective cannot be determined by how a particular community of addressers and addressees make use of code resources as appropriate to their own contexts of use. The nature of communication cannot be accounted for by describing how a particular community of users communicate. But it is not only that different communicative contexts and purposes will necessarily call for the creative exploitation of the virtual code but in the case of English as a lingua franca users will naturally draw on the encoding resources of languages other than English to produce hybrid message forms. So, for example, lexical items from one linguistic source may be phonologically or morphologically adapted to conform to another's encoding principles. Or where an expression is entirely well formed according to the virtual morphological rules of English but whose syntactic structure conforms to the principles of another language. Such linguistic hybridity is well attested in ELF, as it is of course in learner language. And in both cases, it is taken as a sign of incompetence.

And it is indeed a sign of incompetence - if competence is defined as knowing how to produce message forms which are in conformity with the conventionalised encodings of the standard language and the patterns of attested native speaker usage. But incompetent users can be capable communicators and indeed their capability in many ways depends on their

incompetence. It has been suggested that the linguistic hybridity of ELF use is evidence of multilingualism. But multilingualism, or plurilingualism, would seem to suggest the co-existence of competences in one or more distinct languages, that the production of hybrid message forms is a kind of code-switching. But in the dynamic interplay of the different factors in the communicative process, these forms are compounded expediently from whatever linguistic resources are immediately available to the participants, whatever their competences in the source languages might be. It is not that they are monolingual, or bilingual or multilingual or plurilingual, or translingual, or interlingual – they are just lingual, and being lingual involves the adaptable creative use of the potential of virtual language. In other words, it involves the exercise of a general lingual capability.

To conclude, we have argued that the concept of communicative competence as it has been defined by Hymes and other ethnographers, and has been adopted as authoritative in the pedagogy of English teaching and testing, is in effect a misconception of how language is actually used in communication. It only accounts for the knowledge that native speaker-listeners have of the encodings that have over time become conventionalised as normal within their own homogeneous speech communities. It is a concept that represents a way of thinking about English that is rooted in the past and, as the study of ELF makes clear, is no longer valid. To quote T. S. Eliot:

> For last year's words belong to last year's language
> And next year's words await another voice.
>
> *Little Gidding*

ELF users do not communicate by using last year's language – a language that belongs to somebody else. They have to find their own voice in their own words and we cannot know just what form these will take. The description of next year's words of ELF voices, we might say, await another VOICE.[3]

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[3] Cf. VOICE. 2013. *The Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English* (version 2.0 online). Director: Barbara Seidlhofer; Researchers: Angelika Breiteneder, Theresa Klimpfinger, Stefan Majewski, Ruth Osimk-Teasdale, Marie-Luise Pitzl, Michael Radeka. http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/

with K. Knapp) and *From International to Local English – and Back Again* (Lang, with R. Facchinetti and D. Crystal).
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