Cazden reflects on theoretical and sociopolitical origins of Hymes’s construct of communicative competence in events occurring just before and after 1960 in the U.S. She comments on Hymes’s emphasis on competence not as abstract systemic potential of a language, but as capability located in individual persons; and she explores competence as both individual repertoire and group reservoir. She reminds us that Hymes’s “appropriateness” is primarily about emergent, creative, non-situationally determined use of language. [Dell Hymes, communicative competence, appropriateness, individual capability versus systemic potential]

Hymes’s construct of communicative competence had its theoretical origin in the convergence of two significant developments in U.S. linguistics that roughly cooccurred just before and after 1960: Noam Chomsky’s transformational generative grammar (1957) and Hymes and Gumperz’s ethnography of communication (1964). A feature common to both is their focus on how the abilities of language users should be defined.

Where Chomsky assumed, a priori, that competence is the knowledge shared by all fluent native speakers, Hymes drew on ethnographic research to show variation in individual speakers’ underlying knowledge. And where Chomsky assumed, again a priori, that the only knowledge that counted in linguistic theory was knowledge of formal structure, Hymes argued that such theory also had to account for knowledge of patterns of use.

In addition to this generally familiar theoretical origin, communicative competence had a less well-known situational stimulus in the independent, but also powerful, sociopolitical scene. The June 1966 conference at which Hymes first publicly discussed communicative competence was entitled “Research Planning Conference on Language Development among Disadvantaged Children,” held at the Ferkauf Graduate School of Education (Hymes 1972 is the version presented at that time).

That June conference had been preceded in the fall of 1965 by a small invitational conference sponsored by the federal Office of Education to brainstorm needed research on how the language of “disadvantaged” children might be implicated in their school success or failure. In 1965–66, the Civil Rights Movement and the response it provoked in President Johnson’s “War on Poverty” were in full swing; Head Start was in its first full year; and his prosecution of the Viet Nam war had not yet made it impossible for Johnson, who had started out as a school teacher, to go down in history as the “education president.” At that time, the only aspect of language that was prominent in professional and public discourse as a possible cause of school failure was nonstandard dialect.

This sociopolitical scene may not have been constitutive of the communicative competence construct in the way that Hymes’s negative critique of Chomsky and positive advocacy of the ethnography of communication were. But that scene may well have affected its expressive form, and certainly added to its subsequent reception and influence.

Individual Capability versus Systemic Potential

Hymes defines competence with the common sense meaning of capability located in individual persons, not in an abstract language system: “It cannot be assumed that the
formal possibilities of a system and individual knowledge are identical. . . . I should take competence as the most general term for the capabilities of a person” (1972:282).

What Chomsky considered the underlying shared knowledge of a language as an abstract system is what Hymes considers only its systemic potential. A description, even explanation, of that systemic potential only describes the resource pool potentially available, but not necessarily even actually available, to individual language acquirers. Where Chomsky assumed homogeneity, Hymes heard variation. My choice of contrasting verbs—assumed versus heard—is deliberate, relating their contrasting theories to contrasting research methodologies: intuition versus ethnography.2

A focus on individual knowledge—so useful in education—entails evidence about variation in the share of the systemic potential particular individuals actually command. In Hymes’s words, underlined in the original, “There is a fundamental difference between what is not said, because there is no occasion to say it, and what is not said, because one does not have a way to say it” (1973:24). This aspect of Hymes’s theoretical understanding I will question at the end.

One source of this conviction about the importance of such variation in shares of the systemic potential may have been Hymes’s interest in Native American languages and their speakers. His oft-quoted example is Bloomfield’s account of a young Menomini:

White Thunder, a man around 40, speaks less English than Menomini, and that is a strong indictment, for his Menomini is atrocious. [Hymes 1972:273]

For a contemporary statement of the same phenomenon, here is a Chicano author, Luis Rodriguez, writing about himself in his memoir, Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.:

I had fallen through the chasm between two languages. The Spanish had been beaten out of me in the early years of school—and I didn’t learn English very well either. That was the predicament of many Chicanos. [1993:219]

What Hymes believed, as Chomsky did not, is that material conditions for language socialization can be so impoverished that the monolingual or bilingual development of individual communicative competence may be constrained. I don’t know if Hymes and Chomsky ever discussed these differences in person, but I remember hearing more than once the fervor with which Hymes criticized Chomsky for speaking as a linguist only of human language potential and not of the conditions limiting human language actuality. Note his two epigraphs in the 1973 version of communicative competence: one from Marx and the other from William Carlos Williams’s epic poem, “Paterson”:

...he remains in the realm of theory and does not view men in their given social connections, under their existing conditions of life, which has made them what they are. He never arrives at the really existing active men, but stops at the abstraction ‘Man’. . . . (Marx, The German Ideology)

The language is missing them
they die also
incomunicado.
The language, the language
fails them
They do not know the words
or have not
the courage to use them . . . (Williams, Paterson)

In recent years, other researchers have commented on individual differences in competence in related ways. In their New Zealand book, Culture Counts, Maori scholar Russell
Bishop and his colleague, Ted Glynn, analyze the “problem of incomplete language models,” one that is familiar to many parents of Pacific Islands immigrant children in New Zealand (1999:48). Specific causes include schooling that values English only, and native language use in the home stopped before English at school is mastered. The result is too often the child’s only partial acquisition of the family’s heritage language, and then the further casualty of less successful learning of English at school in the absence of a strong first language base. Some readers may remember the controversy that erupted some years ago when a North American researcher suggested the harsher term semi-lingualism for what Bishop and Glynn explain more gently as the result of “incomplete language models.”

Closer to home, in their important article, “Cultural Ways of Learning: Individual Traits or Repertoires of Practice?” (2003), Kris Gutierrez and Barbara Rogoff use the term repertoires of practice to refer broadly to language and other cultural practices, and to argue against the alternative explanation of shared culture via static “cultural styles.” It seems to me consonant with Gutierrez and Rogoff’s nonessentialist stance to suggest that individual repertoires of practice among members of any cultural group will not be identical, precisely because of their overlapping but not identical experiences, interests, and so forth. That would mean that in addition to individual repertoires, there is justification for hypothesizing a larger cultural group reservoir.

One final, strikingly similar, use of the terms repertoire and reservoir comes from British sociologist of education Basil Bernstein’s last book, Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity (2000). Here is an extended quote from his analysis of “discourses” that seems to me consonant with Hymes and also Bishop and Glynn, and Gutierrez and Rogoff:

> I wish to consider a fictitious community. . . . Here a distinction can be made between the set of strategies [for discourse use] any one individual possesses . . . and the total sets of strategies possessed by all members of this community. I shall use the term repertoire to refer to the set of strategies and their analogic potential possessed by any one individual, and the term reservoir to refer to the total of sets and its potential of the community as a whole. . . . There will be differences between the repertoires because of differences between the members arising out of differences in member contexts and activities, and their associated issues. [Bernstein 2000:158]

The repertoire–reservoir distinction—explicit in Bernstein, implicit as I am suggesting in Hymes—has clarified for me the long-standing debate between another pair of terms: deficit versus difference. It now seems to me they are not parallel terms, and to assert one—today usually difference—does not automatically negate the possibility of the other, deficit. Whereas difference is a description of relationships among language or discourse systems, deficit may still be an apt description of the capabilities of individual, inevitably-partial, knowers of that system compared to other individuals when confronting particular situational demands.

One more current term deserves comment. In cognitive science and education, cognition is often described as “distributed.” The development of human knowledge and ability does require collaborative interactions with others, and the abilities of more than one person often combine in “coconstructions” to productive effect. But the term distributed cognition is sometimes used to argue that we should only locate knowledge “between minds,” intermentally, and not within individual minds, intramentally, at all. Hymes’s emphasis on individual knowledge—in unquestionably “social minds” (Gee 1992)—seems to me still a useful complementary perspective, especially with respect to pedagogy.

**Appropriateness**

In Hymes’s definition, communicative competence includes not only knowledge of language forms but also knowledge of form–function relationships learned from the
embeddedness of all language use in social life. His intellectual interest here is less in argument with Chomsky, and more the necessity for the hybrid field of Ethnography of Communication. As a linguistic anthropologist, he argued that linguists were ignoring language functions, and anthropologists paid attention to every other aspect of culture while ignoring as transparent the most important medium in which culture was enacted and thereby acquired by the developing child. In acquiring that medium, each child learns not only what is systemically possible but also what is culturally and situationally appropriate.

Influential as Hymes’s discussion of appropriateness has been, two serious issues have been raised. The first is the validity of the parallelism that Hymes’s formulation seems to assume between grammaticality in Chomsky’s theory and appropriateness in his own. Without trying to discuss all the implications of this argument, I want to point out that Hymes does not define appropriateness as only the ability to respond in a preexisting context; on the contrary, he affirms the importance of human ability to create contexts through language:

Let me reiterate that speech styles are not mechanical correlations of features of speech with each other and with contexts. The criterion of a significant speech style is that it can be recognized, and used, outside its defining context, that is, by persons or in places other than those with which its typical meaning is associated. [1973:60]

A related discussion today is about the extent to which cognition is not only “distributed,” as discussed above, but also “situated.”

To limit communicative competence only to such “mechanical correlation” between language and situation would be almost Skinnerian. In emphasizing instead the emergent, creative, nonsituationally determined use of stylistic knowledge, Hymes seems rather to parallel Chomsky’s emphasis in his famous attack on Skinner (Chomsky 1959), on creative nonsituationally determined use of language structure.

A second issue, more central to educational concerns, is that being evaluative terms, both grammatical and appropriate beg the question of criteria for distinguishing them. Although judging grammaticality can pose problems—with respect to dialect differences, for example, such problems escalate when judging appropriateness. By definition, appropriate means in accordance with social norms; but that just begs the question of whose norms, and why they should be adhered to and when they should be violated. It also raises a question about the ease with which Hymes assumes one can distinguish between “what is not said, because there is no occasion to say it, and what is not said, because one does not have a way to say it,” quoted earlier. Although I support that distinction theoretically, I wonder if an emotionally powerful situation may, somehow, prompt the emergence of new competence in the speaker.

As a provocative case in point, I end with an example from Hymes’s analysis of a Native American myth from In Vain I Tried to Tell You (1981). The theme of the story, “The ‘wife’ who ‘goes out’ like a man,” is the conflict between maintenance of social norms and attentiveness to immediate experience. Hymes’s analysis of this myth has multiple layers of linguistic, social, and literary significance that go beyond our concerns. To the point here, the words of the book’s title are the daughter’s. She perceives an unusual sound when her uncle’s “wife” urinates. But when she tries to tell her mother, Seal, that it sounds like a man, she is shushed. When Seal later discovers that her brother has been murdered, the daughter cries out, “In vain I tried to tell you.” The daughter’s speech preceding this remonstrance is the longest in the myth (and evidently even unusually long for language use in that Clackamas speech community). It “breaks through into performance,” emergent in response to the immediate situation, as the girl retells the whole incident and accuses her mother of responsibility for her uncle’s death.
In Hymes’s analysis, Seal and her daughter contrast in both speech style and worldview. Using Basil Bernstein’s terms, Hymes characterizes the mother’s speech as positional and restricted, the daughter’s as personal and elaborated:

The mother’s speech throughout the myth is a perfect example of Bernstein’s “restricted code.” It is positional speech in terms of her status as a mother with a certain social position. The girl’s speech is not very extensive at the beginning, but the whole last part of the story is turned over to her. She retells the story metapragmatically in an elaborated code and in a burst [of] elaborated speech so that the story is, in effect, an account of her assumption of a new level of experience and understanding. [1982:133]

Research in both first and second language acquisition now provides ample evidence that previously learned patterns of language use can be transformed and reorganized, silently and out of awareness, into more complex constructions. All humans, of whatever age, have the inherent potential to increase their share of the available reservoir. We understand less about what helps that to happen. At the risk of overgeneralizing Hymes’s meaning of his important term emergent, it is perhaps not far-fetched to suggest that the daughter’s “new level of experience and understanding,” in the emotional intensity of the moment, somehow stimulated some such cognitive process. If that is possible, we should not assume that there is a “fundamental difference between what is not said, because there is no occasion to say it, and what is not said, because one does not have a way to say it,” as Hymes assumed in 1973. Here questions about the implications of “repertoire and reservoir” and “appropriateness” come together.

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Notes

Acknowledgments. An earlier version of this essay (ED 399–764) was presented as a paper at an invited colloquium on “communicative competence” at the annual meeting of the American Association of Applied Linguistics in 1996, the 30th anniversary of Hymes’s first presentation of his construct, for which John Gumperz and I were the two discussants. The first section of this essay was intended as one version of the early history of his ideas by a contemporary colleague, and is re-presented here, 15 years later, as still just that. The later sections, on Hymes’s related constructs of individual capability versus systemic potential and appropriateness, raise issues for discussion, and have been considerably revised.

1. The adjective disadvantaged was common usage in the mid-1960s, but soon became criticized for “blaming the victim.” In a more personal note, it was the prepublication copy of my first article, a review of “Subcultural Differences in Children’s Language” (Cazden 1966) that led to a newly minted doctorate being invited to this small conference, where I met those, like Hymes, whom I had only known through their published words.

2. In this contrast, Hymes suggests that he was differentiating his idea not only from Chomsky but also from Halliday: “If I understand Halliday correctly, his conception of ‘meaning potential’ would correspond to my ‘systemic potential’ ” (1984:12, postscript).

3. Hymes notes that the first epigraph is quoted from Easton and Guddat 1967:418–419; and the second from Williams 1963:20–21.

4. This difference between social life considered irrelevant to language competence by Chomsky but constitutive by Hymes has seemed to me related to their different positions on the political left: more anarchist in the case of Chomsky, more socialist in the case of Hymes.

References Cited

Bernstein, Basil
