

# A Competence-Based Approach to Interpretation of a Language Sign by an Individual: The Search for a Term

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**Abstract**—Interpretation of a language sign by an individual in the framework of a competence-based approach is discussed, which is a novelty in the theoretical studies underlying the methodology of teaching a foreign / non-native language. The term ‘*linguistic capability*’ (the Russian equivalent for ‘*linguistic competence*’) is offered to indicate the ability of an individual to verbalize the mental content of a language and to interpret a language sign. As substitution of this term, the term ‘*communicative competence*’ is offered; comparative analysis of modern approaches to determining a communicative competence and a linguistic capability (‘*linguistic competence*’) is made, and the history of the terms’ formation in science is considered. The conclusions made in the study have allowed us to consider the linguistic capability as a linguistic component of communicative competence; i.e., they have confirmed our assumption that these notions are not equivalent, and that mutual substitution of these terms is not relevant.

**Keywords**—*linguistic capability* (‘*linguistic competence*’), *communicative competence*, *ability to interpret a language sign*, *a competence-based approach*, *teaching a foreign / non-native language*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The theory of teaching a foreign / non-native language is becoming more and more comprehensive and multi-dimensional, including new issues and aspects of the learning process. Teaching languages now contains a study of different strategies of mastering a language connected with the ways of acquiring and retaining information and with optimization of learning by forming a personal attitude (associative ties, emotions) of a student to the word; the processes taking place in the semantics of a word (‘semantic shifts’) due to its re-interpretation are considered. Such array of issues presupposes a study of an individual’s ability to verbalize the mental content of a language and to interpret a language sign; moreover, it is impossible to solve the problems relating to optimization of language learning until the ways of formation of this ability, its structure and functioning are investigated and understood [1].

However, the above phenomenon is not a subject of theoretical studies underlying methodological investigations. We can suppose that the absence of theoretical studies in language didactics is caused by its inclusion into the concept of

communicative competence, which expresses the general goal of language teaching determining the content of the learning processes and is believed to be basic.

We believe that a special term is required to denote an individual’s ability to verbalize the mental content of a language and to interpret a language sign, all the more so as it has been introduced into the linguistic discourse, – *a linguistic capability* (‘*linguistic competence*’). Hence, the goal of our study is to prove the necessity of introducing the term ‘*a linguistic capability*’ (‘*linguistic competence*’) into the term pool of the methodology of teaching a foreign / non-native language, which necessitates the following:

- 1) Analyzing the modern approaches to defining a communicative competence and, especially, a linguistic capability.
- 2) Investigating formation and establishment of the concepts ‘*a linguistic capability*’ and ‘*a communicative competence*’.

The relevance of this study is determined by the necessity of developing the theoretical foundations of defining an individual’s ability to verbalize a language sign in the framework of a competence-based approach.

As there is no theoretical model of an individual’s ability to verbalize a language sign and to assign mental content to it in the methodology of teaching a foreign language / a non-native language, proposing a working hypothesis for this phenomenon as a linguistic capability (‘*a linguistic competence*’) may be considered as a theoretical contribution of this study.

## II. MODERN APPROACHES TO DEFINING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND A LINGUISTIC CAPABILITY (‘A LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE’)

The term ‘*communicative competence*’ was introduced into language didactics by M.N. Vyatutnev, who suggested interpreting it as “selection and implementation of the programs of speech behavior depending on an individual’s ability of orientation in a situation of communication; an ability to classify situations depending on the subject, objects, and communicative attitudes, which students have before the beginning of the conversation, as well as those which emerge

during the conversation in the process of mutual adaptation" [2]. The concept of a communicative competence was further developed in the framework of the studies conducted by the European Council aimed at determining the level of language proficiency. In the modern methodology of teaching a non-native language, this term is understood as "the ability to perform a certain activity on the basis of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and work experience acquired during studies" [3].

It seems reasonable to distinguish the terms '*a communicative competence*' (with the article) and '*communicative competence*' (no article). The latter word occurs more and more often as part of such word combinations as '*general competence*', '*professional competence*', etc. While *competence* is understood as an ability to perform certain actions (including speech), *a competence* is perceived as a component of such ability as knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired during learning. Hence, a competence refers to a number of issues in which an individual is well-oriented, has knowledge and experience. Competence is a property of an individual based on possessing a competence. A communicative competence, as a linguistically, psychologically, and methodologically organized system, is viewed as an interdisciplinary phenomenon [4].

The diversity of the linguistic competence, which may cause ambiguity of its model representation, requires a detailed study of the term. It was introduced into the Russian psycholinguistics by A.A. Leontyev as indication of a "psychophysiological mechanism ensuring mastery or mastering of a language" [1]; the outstanding linguist defined the subject of psycholinguistics as a relation between the system of a language and a linguistic capability [1]. Later, probably due to the necessity to consider that "no knowledge can become public before it enters "an individual brain", and psychologically it makes no difference how significant the result of knowledge is for the public" [1], the scholar added new, in our opinion, cognitive, meanings ("ways to represent linguistically the content of thinking" [1]) and stated the following definition of a linguistic capability: "the set of physiological and psychological conditions ensuring production, reproduction, and adequate perception of language signs by the members of a language collective" [1]. It is to be noted that Leontyev does not distinguish between a linguistic capability and speech activity.

Having determined as the focal task of cognitive linguistics "description and explanation of a linguistic capability and / or the knowledge of a language as an inherent cognitive structure and the speaker-listener dynamic behavior, viewed as a system of processing information, consisting of a finite number of separate units and coordinating linguistic information at different levels", E.S. Kubryakova treats a linguistic capability "as a characteristic of what an individual can do with the available language data and of the processes in the course of which an individual acquires this knowledge and how he/she uses it" [5].

E.V. Lukashevich sees a linguistic capability included into three ways of representing a native language: a language – text, a language – system, and a language – ability (a language in its pre-speech readiness (L.V. Shcherba, A.A. Potebnya), meaning

the ability of an individual to interpret a language sign and to verbalize the mental content of the language [6].

The studies of the linguistic capability are represented in the other authors' concepts.

Yu. N. Karaulov defines the linguistic capability of an individual as "a possibility for him/her to produce and understand previously unknown texts, not produced and not heard by him/her" [7] and is critical about treating a linguistic capability as a mechanism, as "as soon as we say 'mechanism', we immediately find ourselves trapped by strictly deterministic relations which exist between its details and parts" [7]. Thus, the scholar introduces the concept of an associative-verbal network, rather close to the notion of a linguistic capability, which embodies "the structure of individual vocabulary", the method of its organization, and notes that the "system, as if transplanted into a human brain (as we study our native language and teach it using dictionaries and textbooks, i.e., systemic descriptions), acts, by definition, as interpretation of the linguistic capability itself" [8]. The weakness of such an attitude is, according to Karaulov, that, "equating 'a system' and a 'capability', we take the path of alienating the language from an individual, a path of considering the 'system' as a self-sufficient entity" [8]. Hence, it is clear that the author aligns the concepts of a linguistic capability and of the associative-verbal network but does not equate them, as "considering the facts of the language from the viewpoint of a linguistic capability presupposes shifting away from the "systemic-deterministic world of the conventional representation of the language system, its grammar and lexis" and addressing the probabilistic world of a linguistic personality" [9].

The researcher's statement that in the associative-verbal network 1) morphology is written in a lexicalized way, i.e., "is fused with the lexis", but "the typical paradigms are represented not concentrated, as it usually happens in systemic descriptions, but as vague structures, distributed among similarly changeable groups of lexemes"; 2) a large number of the most common, simple, and banal word combinations are present; 3) "elements of a naïve linguistic perception of the world by a native speaker are reflected"; 4) "often not realizable pragmatic characteristics of a language and of its speaker (evaluations, attitudes, motives, values) allow E.V. Lukashevich to consider the associative-verbal network "a content model of a linguistic capability of an individual" [6].

The notion of a mental-lingual complex, introduced by V.V. Morkovkin, agrees with the concept of a linguistic capability. The definition of a mental-lingual complex as a self-organizing information system functioning on the basis of a human mind, which ensures perception, understanding, evaluation, storage, transformation, generation and transfer of information" [10] includes contamination of the perceptions of a linguistic capability as an ability to form signs (perception, understanding, storage, generation and transfer of information) maintained by psycholinguists and as a phenomenon of interpreting a language sign (evaluation and transformation of information) by cognitive linguists.

Such synthesis of psycholinguistic and cognitivist concepts is also characteristic of the studies by, for example, A.M. Shakhnarovich [11] and V.A. Pishchalnikova [12], who,

defining the essence of a linguistic capability from the standpoint of psycholinguistics, state (V.A. Pishchalnikova) or imply (A.N. Shakhnarovich) the fact of personal interpretation of a language sign by an individual: a linguistic capability is a kind of an individual way of “storing” a language in one’s brain and at the same time, a way of implementing the elements of the language system reflected by the brain” [11].

A.M. Shakhnarovich identifies the semantic component as the component occupying a special place in the structure of the linguistic capability, understanding it as a “subsystem of the rules of choosing an adequate value, which are not identical to the rules constituting the grammar component” [5]. The experimental studies of the lexical and grammatical components conducted by A.N. Shakhnarovich (using children’s speech) и Yu.N. Karaulov (using the speech of modern adult native speakers) allow us to support the following: a) “The components of the linguistic capability are formed as ways of organizing units for solving communicative tasks in specific situations of activity, where speech actions play a subordinated but rather important role” [11], b) “In accordance with such concepts, combination takes place in the process of generation or perception of a text, synthesis of different components occurs, which in other situations are independent entities and are stored separately in the human memory: lexis separately, rules of word changing separately, rules of word combination or word formation, separately, too” [7]. In other words, a linguistic capability is composed of components which correspond to the levels of the language structure, i.e., of the phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and semantic components. These components are independent from each other, in the opinion of A.M. Shakhnarovich, and fused (the lexico-semantic and grammatical levels), according to Yu. N. Karaulov.

A.M. Shakhnarovich identifies several stages of development of the linguistic capability, comparing them to the cognitive activity of humans. At the first stage of development of the linguistic capability of a child, the practical activity involving objects prevails. At the second stage, together with the object-involving activity, the cognitive activity influences development of speech. Cognitive creativity, development of memory and of imagination allow the speech to be not simply a tool of practical activity or even a motive for it. “Before a child develops certain cognitive capabilities, which cause emergence of certain semantic intentions, requiring certain means of linguistic expression, respective language forms and structures are not used in a child’s speech, although the child may hear them very often in adults’ speech” [11]. Cognitive activity is oriented to the needs of a personality (upon himself / herself). At the third stage, the decisive role belongs to the communicative activity, which supplies material for generalizations, analysis, and learning the norms of the social and verbal behavior. The communicative activity is more oriented to social needs (the need of communication with others). Hence, in development of a linguistic capability, the processes and cognition and communication naturally combine with each other [11]. Hence, the idea emerges about the necessity of developing the linguistic capability in the process of tuition. For example, V.A. Pishchalnikova insists on the impossibility of effective generation of speech and meaning

without a developed linguistic capability: “A concrete system of signs (a language) acts as a tool / means of realization of the already existing linguistic capability and in many aspects is determined by learning and skills acquired” [12].

A.A. Zalevskaya presents a parallel three-component structure: the speech mechanism of a human – the language as a capability (mental characteristic) – speech organization of an individual (the structure of a mental characteristic) [12] and identifies the following characteristics of a linguistic capability: 1) functionality – assignation to be used for the purpose of certain activity, 2) dynamism – the ability to be formed, vary, and develop in accordance with the external and internal conditions of conducting the activity; 3) an integrative capacity – the ability to ensure compression of the meaning by involving a complex of potential possibilities to evolve the situation, to describe an object, etc.; 4) code variability – the diversity of forms of knowledge representation [13].

All the above concepts are theoretically substantiated and evolved based on wide arrays of experiments.

It is to be noted that the term ‘*linguistic capability*’ is used by some specialists in language tuition as an antonymous expression for the word combination ‘*linguistic inability*’ [14]. In our opinion, in such environment, the term ‘*language capability*’ would be more appropriate.

Thus, the term ‘*linguistic capability*’ is more common in term apparatuses used in the area of psycholinguistics and the cognition science: as a theoretical foundation, these areas of science use the provisions related to understanding a language as a specific semiotic structure, capable of triggering the mechanisms in an individual’s brain, which lead to generation of meanings (the works by W. von Humboldt [15], A.A. Potebnya [16], I.A. Baudouin de Courtenay [17], A.A. Leontyev [1], etc.); they are united by common issues related to the “general human mechanisms of mastering and using a language, with used universal strategies and key elements”: both sciences imply serious consideration of the issue of language conscience and a language personality [18]. The existence and functioning of this term in several aspects of the language science is attributed to the fact that speech, which is, in fact, realization of the linguistic capability, is represented as a set of certain processes, namely, mental and cognitive processes, – “as a mental process, speech is related to all the other mental processes, which are traditionally viewed as cognitive (learning)” [19]. It first appeared in the Russian psycho-linguistic science in the works by A.A. Leontyev [1], originating from the idea by L.V. Shcherba “on psycho-physiological speech organization of an individual” as a “system of potential language concepts” [20]. For the contemporary phase of language studies, the following view of a linguistic capability is characteristic: 1) an individual’s ability to generate signs (in psycholinguistics); 2) an individual’s ability to verbalize the mental content of a language and to interpret a language sign (in the cognitive science). Linguists (A.A. Zalevskaya [13], A. A. Leontyev [1], A.M. Shakhnarovich [11] et al.) refer to the main characteristics of a linguistic capability the following features: a) its inequality to the abstract language system, b) non-reducibility to simple realization of the given system. Hence, direct transposition of

the products of meta-linguistic activity onto description of the rules of functioning of a linguistic capability seems impossible.

The term ‘communicative competence’ was introduced into the Russian methodology of teaching foreign languages / a non-native language in the framework of a competence-based approach to describe the integrated result of a teaching process and is understood as the ability of making effective communication in specific (social and linguo-cultural) environments.

Thus, we consider it possible to assume that a linguistic capability, as a mechanism ensuring communication as such, is the linguistic component of communicative competence, together with the socio-linguistic and pragmatic components.

### III. FORMATION AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NOTIONS ‘LINGUISTIC CAPABILITY’ (‘A LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE’) AND ‘COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE’

F. de Saussure writes that a language system, or a system inventory of units, is impressed as a sum of images in the mind of each member of a human collective and does not depend on the ways of its realization in speech, which is always specific, as it is determined by an individual’s will and by the type of the situation. A language as a system (*‘langue’*) and a linguistic capability realized by way of speech (*‘parole’*) both ensure speech activity, which the linguist named *‘langage’* in the broad sense of the word [21].

The ideas of de Saussure were reflected in the works by the American linguist N. Chomsky, who introduced the term *‘competence’* into the active scientific vocabulary [22]. To be more exact, he returned it into the concept pool of linguistics, as this term had been used in the works by W. von Humboldt and other linguists in the studies of the problems of generative grammar. It should be pointed out that Chomsky offered also the term *‘performance’*: *competence* determines *performance*.

Chomsky himself defined *‘competence’* as something like potential knowledge of a language, an ability to master it, a congenital ability to speak, a system of the processes of generating linguistic statements [22].

There is an opinion that the *competence – performance* dichotomy was first disclosed by Chomsky as the difference between the knowledge of the language of the speaker and of the listener; later, the followers of Chomsky, and he himself with some provisos, began to imply the ‘linguistic capability’ under these terms, i.e., potential knowledge of the language and of the language of its actual speaker, and ‘linguistic activity’, i.e., the actual speech in an actual environment [Chomsky]. According to Chomsky, the linguistic capability is primary: it determines the linguistic activity and represents a congenital genetically inherited human property [22]. We see as the possible prerequisite of this hypothesis the following: when it was formed, an opinion dominated that “a linguistic environment in which a child lives is poor and is often incapable of influencing him/her in a proper way” [23].

For Chomsky, *competence* denoted an exclusively linguistic phenomenon, *linguistic competence*. L.P. Krysin noted “extreme pragmatism of the Chomskyan interpretation of the

concept of *competence*, which considered only its linguistic aspect and fully ignored any social, situational and similar “pragmatic factors” [24].

The term *‘performance’* does not cause any discrepancies and disagreements either in the linguistic community or among specialists in the area of language teaching methodology: these are – linguistic activity / language use / speech activity / practical implementation of language rules.

The Russian linguists translated the term *‘competence’* as *‘communicative / linguistic competence’* and *‘linguistic capability’*. Hence, these terms, depending on which aspect is more relevant for the researcher, are used in the papers as mutually replaceable.

When translating into Russian the term *‘competence’*, some methodologists ignore its linguistic content and use it to denote “the ability to perform some activity and a set of knowledge, abilities, and skills formed in the process of learning a certain field of knowledge” [3], i.e., the basics of communicative competence [3, 25].

The term *‘communicative competence’* was introduced by D. Hymes. In it, Hymes emphasized the methodological component of the concept of competence, having demonstrated that the knowledge of a language presupposes not only the mastery of its grammar and vocabulary but also a clear understanding of the speech environment in which certain words and grammatical structures can or should be used [26]. In other words, *communicative competence*, according to Hymes, signifies the inner knowledge of the situational appropriateness of the language.

It is the notion of communicative competence proposed by Hymes, not the idea of (linguistic) competence offered by Chomsky, that is, the basis for the “exclusively methodological” communicative competence. The concept of communicative competence is much wider than that of (linguistic) competence (the ability to understand and produce an unlimited number of linguistically correct sentences using the mastered language signs and the rules of their connection). Hymes identified grammatical, socio-linguistic, strategic, and discursive competences in the structure of the communicative competence [26]. It should be noted that in the modern methodological literature the components of the communicative competence may be defined differently; for example, language competence, speech competence, sociocultural competence, compensatory competence, and learning and cognitive competence [27], linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, sociocultural competence, strategic competence, discursive competence, social competence [28], linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discursive competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, social competence, psychological competence [29], linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, (speech) discursive competence, strategic competence, social competence, sociocultural competence, subject-related competence, and professional competence [3]. Identification of such components of the communicative competence as linguistic, sociocultural, and pragmatic competences seems to be the optimal solution. The remaining components of the communicative competence

terminologically somehow or other characterize the three above indicated components.

This, too, confirms our conclusion that the communicative competence and the (linguistic) competence may be considered as a whole and its part.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Having reviewed the theoretical studies relating to the linguistic capability (competence) and the communicative competence, we confirm our assumption that these two phenomena are interrelated but not mutual replaceable. Each of them has its history of origination in science as an object of studies. The importance of their differentiation is necessitated by the need to draw a dividing line between cognitive (academic) and basic interpersonal communicative skills of an individual" [30].

The close connection between the terms '*linguistic capability (competence)*' and '*communicative competence*', partly attributed to the specifics of their translation from English into Russian, should not lead to the confusion of the concepts relating to them. In our opinion, the linguistic capability (competence) just as the ability of an individual to verbalize the mental content of the language and to interpret a language sign is the linguistic component of the communicative competence and requires its own term, as development of the meta-language of description is the primary task of science.

We consider this conclusion to be a reasonable and sufficient ground for introducing the term '*linguistic capability (competence)*' into the terminological pool of linguo-didactics.

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